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The Community Economic Development Toolkit

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The Community Economic Development Toolkit

Abstract

This article describes the toolkit available to community economic development educators at the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service. The types of tools fall into two categories: educational programming and technical assistance. Rural communities that have committed themselves to the process of economic development can benefit from the various tools in the toolkit. The tools can be used singly; however, they tend to work best when used together as a part of a comprehensive community-based plan for economic development.

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Introduction

The once farm-dependent communities of rural Oklahoma are currently facing economic decline. If they are to survive, some form of economic development must take place, and the responsibility will ultimately lie with the leaders of the community to aggressively plan for and nurture that development.

The toolkit approach to community economic development (CED) is becoming a commonplace method for addressing the variety of needs of rural communities. The idea is that the community can pick and choose the tools that best suit their specific needs. See, for instance, the toolkit of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign that is located at www.ag.uiuc.edu/~lced/toolbox/.

Oklahoma's Community Economic Development Toolkit

The toolkit available to Extension educators in Oklahoma provides communities with the assistance they need to develop their economies. The process demands that the educators become fully engaged with their community partners, who, simply stated, know more about what's going on in their communities than anyone else does. The role of Extension is to understand the needs communicated by these partners and to deliver university resources and expertise to them (Extension Committee on Organization and Policy, 2002).

The toolkit approach to CED recognizes that different communities are at different stages in their development and thus have a variety of needs. The various tools are designed to address these different needs. As the Extension educator becomes engaged with community partners, it should become clear to all parties which tools are the most appropriate.

The specific tools in Oklahoma's CED toolkit fall into two basic categories:

- Educational Programming and
- Technical Assistance.

Educational Programming Tools

The educational programming tools in Oklahoma's CED toolkit include strategic planning assistance and training workshops. Strategic planning is defined as the process of partnering with community leaders to identify future goals and plans for how to achieve them (Woods, Frye, & Ralstin, 1998). Oklahoma offers training and assistance to communities in strategic planning for economic development in two phases.

1. Assistance in visioning and strategic planning. In this phase, a community assesses its strengths and weaknesses. These assessments, in conjunction with a visioning process, can lead community volunteers toward specific strategic plans that will accomplish their economic development goals. Ultimately, however, the strategic planning process is all about citizens deciding what is best for their community. The most-valued role of the Extension educator in this case is one of bringing concerned citizens together and facilitating a situation whereby they can engage in effective community-based problem solving (Leatherman & Deller, 2001).
2. Assistance in implementing strategies in specific areas such as retail trade development, tourism development, or business attraction. Once a community decides upon a direction for their economic development efforts, Extension has a variety of resources available to assist them in these efforts.

Oklahoma is also currently offering two very popular workshops to community leaders across the state.

Oklahoma PRIDE teaches front-line employees quality customer service techniques and helps them learn about highlights and tourist attractions in their area. The goal of the program is to:

Produce
Resourceful
Informed
Devoted
Employees

ORIGINS Internet Training teaches community leaders how to use an electronic database Web site called ORIGINS. The site, located at <http://origins.ou.edu/>, contains a myriad of data specific to the state of Oklahoma, including personal income, employment, retail sales, and population.

Technical Assistance Tools

According to Christenson (1989), technical assistance occurs when the provider performs tasks *for* a community, as opposed to *with* the community. Christenson's definition, however, is somewhat misleading when applied to Oklahoma's CED technical assistance tools. In Oklahoma, communities are urged to use the information provided by Extension (such as retail sales data, housing counts, and socio-demographic data) in order to develop customized plans of action. Even though community leaders are expected to take the lead in the formation of these plans, Extension educators are available every step of the way to foster an understanding of what the data means and to make available the various resources of the university.

Specifically, some of the technical assistance tools offered by the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service include:

- **Economic Base Reports:** provide detailed background data about the resources in the community, such as population, income, employment, and retail sales.
- **Economic Impact Studies:** measure the change that is expected to occur in the economy if there is a change in the economic base, such as a new plant locating in the community.
- **Analysis of Retail Trends:** tracks trends in sales tax collection and identifies gaps in the local retail market.
- **Housing Needs Assessment:** profiles the community's housing market and presents estimates of housing supply and demand.
- **Surveys:** can be designed to meet various community needs (e.g., community opinion, consumer or business, housing needs).
- **Targeted Industry Analysis:** develops a list of industries that have a moderate to strong likelihood of locating or expanding in the community. Community input is crucial.

Conclusion

Theoretically, the different tools in the toolkit perform best when used together. For example, a community in the very early stages of the strategic planning process needs to know some basics about their community, such as population distribution, employment trends and gaps in their retail market. At this point, the technical assistance tools, such as the economic base study and the analysis of retail trends, become very important.

As the community comes to a better understanding of the development tract it wants to take, other technical assistance and educational tools will become valuable. For example, a community seeking to increase employment opportunities through the attraction of industry should go through targeted industry analysis.

These are rough times for our rural communities, but the toolkit offered by the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service can assist communities that are committed to the process. It takes a lot of hard work on the community's part, but the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service is committed to being a valuable partner.

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