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# COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN A LOW-INCOME COUNTY

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The slogan "helping people help themselves" is one that extension workers continue to believe in. All of us know, however, that it is a lot easier to help people help themselves when these people have some resources to begin with! The purpose of this paper is to discuss the ideas and successful approaches that were used in community development of a county with minimal resources and low income.

People in a community or county have a problem when there is a gap between what they want and what they have. The acuteness of the situation is, of course, directly proportional to the width of the gap. When attempting to narrow the gap it is always helpful to start with the concept that it is the *people's* problem rather than the *county's* problem. Then we think in terms of *individuals* rather than the nebulous "county" finding alternatives and answers. It is also helpful to think in terms of specific community problems instead of overall economic development of an area. It is better to concern ourselves with the sawmill closing in "Rocky Gap" than the depression of Appalachia.

## WORK IN A LOW-INCOME COUNTY

The county on which I will report is very picturesque and beautiful. It is situated among the Blue Ridge Mountains on a high plateau where the climate is delightful. The Blue Ridge Parkway goes completely through the county. Even though the county is rich in scenery, it is poor in terms of economic standards. The latest figures list over one-half of its families with incomes of less than \$3,000. During the decade of the 1950's the population declined 8 percent, while in the state as a whole it increased by 20 percent. The county ranks among the top three in the state having the largest percent of rural farm persons. In 1960 there were 57 percent rural farm persons in the county compared with the state average of 10 percent. Over one-third of its population must work outside the county. The median school years completed for persons over 25, including both male and female, was 7.5 years.

The road system is limited. Only one road carries bus service. The county is served by neither a railroad nor a small airport.

About one-half of the land area is in timberland, the county's most valuable natural resource.

The county's agricultural sector is made up primarily of small family farms, averaging 112 acres in size. Farming employs about one quarter of the population and is the principal source of income and employment. Most of these farm families know they cannot farm their way out of poverty. Thus, migration from the county to the more urban areas reflects frustration and unrest, not only among the low-income farmers but among all families that live in rural areas.

The county's industry consists of several small sawmills and two small garment plants. Combined employment for the two garment factories ranges from 450 to 550 persons. Each sawmill has a work force of less than twenty people. Total employment in manufacturing industries was about 600 workers in 1967. Both apparel and lumbering industries are relatively low-wage industries. The apparel industry employs mainly women while lumbering employs primarily men.

With declining employment in lumbering and agriculture, approximately *one-third* of the county's resident workers have found jobs outside the county. Most out-commuters travel to jobs thirty to fifty miles away.

In February 1968, the Virginia Employment Commission published the results of a study showing that of the 4,515 county residents 16 years of age and over three out of five had nonagricultural work experience. Over 1,200 said they would be available full time if they could find suitable employment in the county. Most of these workers are now working outside of the county. Some live outside of the county but would like to return should suitable employment become available.

People throughout the county have continued to express concern about what is going to happen to their community. They believe in their community and want to live there. Yet the county has continued to lose population because of the lack of job opportunities. People of this area have a fine reputation for being willing and conscientious workers.

#### THE LEADERSHIP SURVEY

The county extension staff was requested to see if help might be available from the Virginia Polytechnic Institute on the problems of the county. Leaders and citizens of the county wanted to improve their community but needed guidance and leadership to get rolling.

To begin with a reputational survey was made of the leadership in the county. This survey systematically identified the county and

community leaders and provided insight into the problems of the county as seen by the leadership. The interviews were conducted with a VPI specialist serving as a member of each survey team.

The interview process helped the county leaders to think about and discuss county problems. The survey also thrust the extension staff into the middle of local concerns and problems. When the concerns of the county were discussed, agriculture and home economics problems were rarely mentioned.

The survey itself seemed to ignite the spark that the county staff needed to provide an effective communication environment for county leaders. This type of concern and participation in the solution of county problems provided a new image for the Extension Service.

While there are threads of common problems throughout all counties, those problems seem to be magnified in a low-income county. The process of interviewing county leaders and asking them to list the problems of the county as they saw them stimulated each individual to give additional thought to problem areas. In effect, the thrust of the survey technique helped create a desire among many of the community leaders to do something about problems of the county.

#### OPERATION BOOTSTRAP

The extension staff analyzed the identified problems and provided background information on them. Informational materials were put together on population projections, expected growth, and job opportunities.

The leadership in the county felt that an all-out effort should be made toward obtaining some type of firm which would provide employment for men in the county. To date, this goal has not been achieved; however, numerous specific problems are now being solved, which will affect the eventual attainment of this goal.

The citizens of the county have had a history of concern for their county and the land. The land is inherently productive if treated right. During the 1950's thousands of pine trees were set out and pasture land was fertilized as part of the overall agricultural development program. The Extension Service and the county agent played a major role in this type of development.

An early industrial development effort in the mid-1950's was successful in bringing two apparel factories to the area to utilize the available source of women workers. After that little if any progress was made in the county for about eight years.

**BETTER SCHOOLS FOR THE CHILDREN.** Six years ago there were four small high schools in the county. Enrollment was declining in three of the schools. Today there is one consolidated high school, but each area continues to have a grade school. The single county high school is located at the county seat, a town of about 500 people. Much concern and distress was expressed by many citizens who felt that if the high school left their area, they would lose the connecting link that held their community together. Looking back, we realize what a truly heroic accomplishment it was to consolidate all the high schools. Today nearly everyone is enthusiastic about the consolidation effort, the increased efficiency, and the ability to provide higher quality education.

**CONSOLIDATION OF CHURCHES.** Following consolidation of the schools many people expressed the thought that the churches should be consolidated into larger congregations. In 1967 four small Presbyterian churches in the county consolidated with the larger Presbyterian Church at the county seat. None of the four could offer a full program to its members. Securing and holding pastors was becoming very difficult. The consolidation included actual legal merger, which allowed property transactions. The enlarged parish now has a minister, a director of Christian education, and a full educational program with excellent participation from the congregation.

**MEDICAL FACILITIES.** When the old country doctor passed away, it was clear that a community effort would be required to provide medical service. The citizens discussed it, pooled their resources, and bought stock in a corporation. This corporation then bought land and built a medical clinic. Today there are two doctors in the county providing medical services to the citizens.

**RECREATION FOR YOUNG PEOPLE.** For years the only source of recreation for young people other than school activities was participation in church or 4-H events. During the summer, children had a chance to go fishing. The highlight of each year was the opportunity to march in the Christmas parade! The young people obviously needed additional recreational facilities. The identified leaders working together as a development board put pressure on the governing body to allocate \$10,000 to build recreational facilities at the high school and at each grade school in the county. The money was allocated, and when the facilities were built, it was possible to apply for Title I funds to provide equipment for the facilities as well as a full-time recreational director at each of the four schools. Those directors were employed this summer and were the first ever to be hired in the county.

Funds from the governing body also were used to build the tennis courts and basketball areas and to provide recreational centers for the young people. A surprising thing about the activities this summer was the large number of adults who came and participated in the evenings. Lights have been installed on both the softball field and the high school football field. This has provided additional interest. There is fierce competition for the first softball championship among softball leagues comprised of teams from churches in the county.

**THE GOLF COURSE AND COUNTRY CLUB.** Another identified problem in trying to attract industry was the lack of recreational facilities for the managerial staff of a prospective industry. A group of young leaders in the county seat took on as a project the establishment of a golf course, country club, and swimming pool. This group incorporated and secured an FHA loan for \$250,000. With these funds a 210-acre farm, ideally suited for a golf course, was purchased. First a swimming pool was built, which has now been in use for two years. The golf course and clubhouse were finished this summer. The extension agent and staff members from VPI worked closely with this group and provided guidance for general layout and for development of golf greens and fairways. The extension agent has been a moving force with this group and is a member of their board of directors.

**COMMUNITY BEAUTIFICATION.** Another major problem in the county was lack of some place to put trash, resulting in unsightly litter along the roadside. With the help of the community beautification specialist at VPI to gain an understanding of what makes a community attractive, an educational effort was undertaken by several service clubs and garden clubs.

An outgrowth of an earlier effort resulted in a dump being provided by the town but none for the county. There was no place for dumping trash other than at the county seat. This problem was brought to the attention of the governing board of the county, and two sites have been selected and hopefully they will be put into operation next year. The town has also acquired a much larger site for a dump and has discontinued the burning of trash, using it for landfill instead.

**SPRUCING UP THE TOWN.** The last two years have seen more improvements in the individual appearances of businesses than had been seen for many, many years. The courthouse received a new sign. The county purchased land adjacent to the courthouse and developed it into a parking lot for county employees. The newspaper constructed a new building. A number of other businesses also improved their store fronts and interiors.

For the first time in the county's history, a subdivision was developed. As is true in most low-income counties rental property is scarce and there are few houses to be purchased. While only four or five subdivision houses will be built on a speculative basis, there is genuine hope that conditions will improve so that other houses in the subdivision will be built in the future. Employees of any new firm in the area would need places to live.

**PURCHASING INDUSTRIAL SITES.** The County Board of Supervisors is purchasing an eleven-acre site near the county seat for \$1,000 per acre and is also planning to take options on two additional sites within a mile of the county seat. This is the first time that any such effort has ever been made in the county. Plans are to make water and sewerage available for each site. When improved, these sites will be made available to interested industrial firms immediately rather than discussing what might, perhaps, be available in the future.

**ARTS AND CRAFTS FESTIVAL.** The Home Demonstration Clubs sponsor a one-day arts and crafts festival for the county. Over 3,000 people attended the first one held in 1967. The festival also included entertainment such as hillbilly bands, greased pig contests, and races. The arts and crafts festival provided opportunities for the people to show many kinds of handmade and homemade articles. It helped stimulate active participation in community events and gave many individuals a renewed sense of pride in their work and their county.

**SOIL SURVEY.** Soils information will be provided for the subdivision development as well as for agricultural purposes. Much of the county has already been mapped, and additional work appears likely.

### **RESULTS: POOR FOLKS HAVE JOBS**

A report from the state OEO office indicated that 860 families, or nearly 40 percent of the population, were living in severe poverty. This report was brought to the attention of the governing board with the statement that at least 600 families needed to participate in either the food distribution program or food stamp program. Told that it must participate in food programs for poor people, the county decided to participate in the commodity distribution program. A former county agent for twenty-five years was hired to carry out this program. After four months of concentrated effort he was able to find less than 100 families that qualified for the program. While the 1960 statistics show many poor people living in the county, the actual fact is that most have now found employment. Today the climate in the community is such that most of the menfolk are willing to overcome

poverty by working even if they have to commute some distance from their homes.

### THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

The decision-making process involves a series of steps: identifying and defining the problem, appraising the resources, analyzing the alternatives, evaluating the consequences, making the decision, and implementing the decision in light of the stated objectives and goals. There are four types of decisions which may be visualized as follows:

*Individual*

*Group*

- (1) *Personal* (2) *Aggregate* (3) *Permissive* (4) *Binding*

These four types of decisions are illustrated in the scenes below. Each scene represents a type of decision.

Scene I shows a yard littered with trash as a result of Joe's personal decision, "It's my yard, I'll throw my trash where I want!" The individual is exercising his right to make a personal decision.



SCENE I. INDIVIDUAL DECISION — PERSONAL

Scene II shows an adjacent gully being filled. Joe and his neighbors all feel that this is a better spot for the trash than the yard and say, "Let's all throw our trash in the gully!" This is an example of aggregated individual decisions.

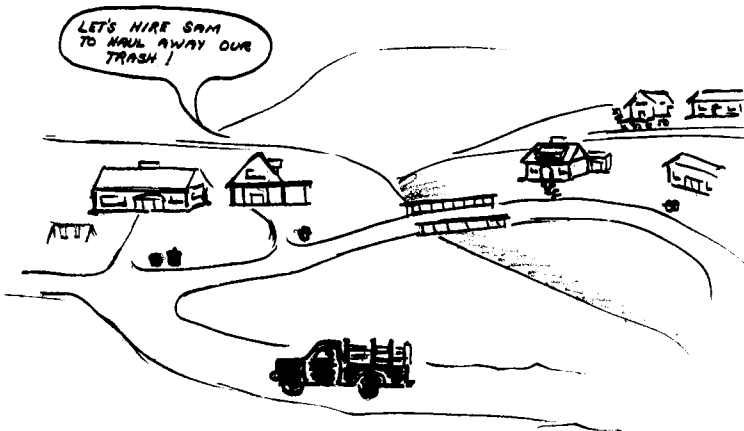
A changing community may require these citizens to re-evaluate the results of their decisions. Alternatives to the trash-in-the-gully problem set the stage for scenes III and IV which illustrate decisions implemented through group action.





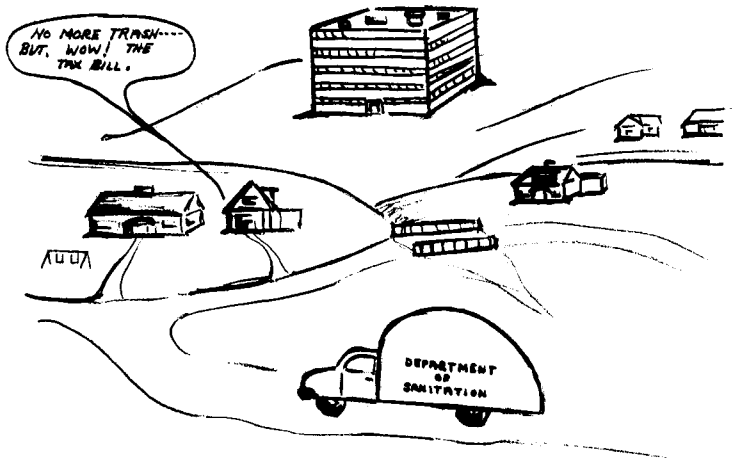
SCENE II. INDIVIDUAL DECISION — AGGREGATE

Scene III shows a setting with more houses and more people. It is no longer possible just to throw the trash in the gully. This stage of development has spawned a problem greater than can be solved by individual decisions. The group permissive decision allows the community to contract to have “*Sam haul away our trash!*” Each home owner has the opportunity to participate for a fee of perhaps \$2.00 per month. While participation is voluntary, there may be some arm twisting if Joe’s yard begins to look or smell too bad.



SCENE III. GROUP DECISION — PERMISSIVE

Scene IV shows the community with more residents and now even an apartment complex. A city owned and operated trash disposal truck picks up the refuse. A referendum was conducted on the trash disposal system including a bond issue, and it passed.



SCENE IV. GROUP DECISION — BINDING

The group decision is binding, “No more trash—but *WOW!* the tax bill!”

The above discussion puts into perspective the kinds of situations that the leaders of the community face. Each situation requires an effective information system about the problem. The amount of controversy increases as we go from Scene I to Scene IV.

Although an issue may be controversial, this should not deter an extension staff from providing factual, unbiased information necessary to help people understand it. This has been the function of the Extension Service and it continues to be. An effective community development extension agent is one whose knowledge and information are well organized and who effectively communicates with the various audiences in the county.

It is important that the information applied to a problem solution have a high believability rating in order that an individual or group will use it in the decision-making process. Historically the Extension Service has supplied information with a high degree of believability. This believability is a very precious thing which we must adequately understand and protect.

### LEADERS AND THE COUNTY

A county development committee was appointed by the governing body of the county last year, and plans are being made for this group to form a nonprofit corporation with the backing and blessing of the county. Information concerning identified leaders in the county

was used when this committee was formed. The extension agent injected this information at the crucial time when membership of this group was being considered.

Thus far, most of the problems that have required group decisions have been in the group permissive area. However, the basic pattern of obtaining information, leadership, and citizen involvement will also apply to group decisions that are binding.

If we can successfully solve each of these specific problems, then we have a chance to solve the overall development problem. A feeling of accomplishment gives additional impetus to working on other specific county problems.

The twelve members of the county development committee are providing guidance on the problems facing the county. This committee has appointed subcommittees appropriate to the kinds of problems being considered. Individuals who were put on these subcommittees were primarily drawn from the list of identified leaders that the extension agents had developed from the reputational survey. Some of the subcommittees are: Landsite Committee, Water and Sewage Committee, Education Committee, Recreation Committee, Beautification Committee, and Publicity Committee. These subcommittees have effectively drawn upon the influential leaders throughout the county to help them with their work on a specific problem. For instance, the Publicity Committee is preparing a brochure on the county. Also, this committee was able to get the State Division of Planning and the State Division of Industrial Development to use more up-to-date information in the state reports that are put out on every county in the state.

#### SUMMARY

Admittedly, it is difficult and trying to tackle the job of working with folks or communities having low incomes and few resources. Yet, if cobwebs can be shaken from people's minds, many things can be done to help such a low-income county. The county that has been described clearly justifies the time and effort devoted to this area of work.

If education is the process of changing the behavioral patterns of people, then extension education is that kind of interaction which brings to bear the decision-making process and the effect of this process on the behavioral patterns of people. The destiny of a county lies squarely in the face of economic forces of change. These forces make it very difficult for the leaders and citizens to control their own destiny. While the task is difficult, it is not impossible.