

Meeting Highlights: Eastern Kentucky University Resources for Rural Communities (11/5/09)

Attendees:

- Charles Hickox, Phd, Dean, Continuing Education & Outreach
- Bob Shadur, Director Regional Stewardship
- Ian Mooers, Executive Director, Center for Economic Development, Entrepreneurship and Technology
- Robert Monk, KAC Rural Communities Chair
- Steven Spalding, KAC Professional Staff

Mr. Mooers came to EKU from George Mason University last January to head several programs at EKU, including the Kentucky Artisan Heritage Trails (KAHT), the State-funded Innovation & Commercialization Center (ICC) the federally-funded Small Business Development Center (SBDC) and the Berea Entrepreneur Assistance Center (BEAC). Essentially his office partners with local communities in their service region to provide community and economic development services. An example program is a financial literacy training program funded by the U.S. Department of the Treasury (Community Financial Access Program). His programs partner with faculty all across EKA depending on the expertise needed.

Dr. Hickox oversees programs in areas of training, including “green skills”, OSHA.

Discussion initially focused on a major bio fuels project, being undertaken at EKU's Center for Renewable and Alternative Fuel Technologies (CRAFT). This program is under the Chairman of the Department of Agriculture, Bruce Pratt. It involves General Atomics, of San Diego. A biofuels processing plant is being developed nearby in Estill County by Green Earth BioFuels (Jeff Sewell, CEO) – it may be 30 – 60 days away from being operational. The focus is on using algae to produce biodiesel, versus reliance on soybeans. The intent is to create an alternative fuels “industry cluster” in the region; the initiative is being supported by the Estill Development Alliance (Chamber + Government).

Bob Shadur directs the Regional Stewardship Program (RSP) at EKU. The program is Commonwealth-mandated, separately funded by the Legislature via the Council on Post Secondary Education and separate from normal University funding streams. Similar programs exist through the US but this is the only one set up in this fashion. The Legislative mandate is for the RSP to be a community-articulated initiative (not university-articulated or driven). The CPE provides infrastructure funding to support the office, and grant funds that each university oversees for its service area.

Because the program is community-articulated, each of the five programs in the state has a different approach or focus. EKU's program addressed five primary areas:

- Economic development and Workforce
- Education
- Environment
- Government (“Better government / collaborative government” – e.g. county-county or city-county cooperation; cooperation with Education boards; get silos to talk to each other)
- Health (defined as “wellness” and “safety”, e.g. public safety)

EKU has an Advisory Council appointed by the President of EKU, overseeing their activities for the 22 county EKU service region. The reporting structure is from the RSP to the Dean of University Programs, to the Provost and then to the President of EKU.

Each Advisory Council is operated differently. EKU's is appointed by the President; at Murray the director recruits Advisory Council members directly.

Jim Vitruha at NKC created the initial program for Kentucky and has created a highly successful program there that is nationally recognized. He works regionally across the state boundary with institutions such as Xavier University and University of Cincinnati.

Regarding the KAC's interest in seeing Agriculture connect to the Regional Stewardship Program is a priority of the KAC strategic plan, KAC has the option of approaching this on a Commonwealth-wide basis or by going to each of the five university-based programs individually in order to create an affiliation with each. The five programs are free-standing and don't directly collaborate on implementation at this time. Shadur would like to see a change in the culture, to encourage more collaboration and recommends that the KAC approach this on a statewide basis via the CPE staff that oversees the entire program (Melissa Bell), while also contacting the individual programs to determine how the KAC and Agriculture can connect with each; the collaboration statewide can come on a cumulative basis.

EKU's program as a focus on "community-based research". The community articulates what areas of research should be pursued; research content comes from the community. An example is the benefits of "movement in the classroom" to improve the performance of elementary school students. Once this priority was identified, research was conducted by EKU faculty in health sciences. Shadur suggested that an example that could be important for Agriculture would be to look at leadership development programs.

Another area could be to examine strategies for Agri-Tourism. Shadur recently had a meeting with the University President, Harry Moberly, the Dean of the College of Business and Technology and the Associate VP for PR and Marketing plus three Agritourism people on this subject. Through its Center for Economic Development, Entrepreneurship and Technology, EKU provides support for the Kentucky Artisan Heritage Trails, which is in the process of rebranding itself. This program is run by Kathy Werking, (teaches part time at EKU) and operates on a state-wide basis. Ms. Werking wants to link the program to the other 4 Regional Stewardship Councils.

A different example of regional cooperation is the focus in 4 counties (Breathitt, Estill, Lee and Powell or "BELP") to focus on developing broadband systems / service, under a \$600,000 Appalachian Regional Commission grant and funding from the Coal Severance fund. The Governor recently announced in Lee County plans to establish a regional technology authority. (Contact person: Joe Crawford).

In the EKU 22 county service region, Shadur thinks the greatest deficiency is in the inclusion of Agriculture in its plans. He would like to see a coalition of regional farmers who could become self-reliant through the production of vegetable crops that could be marketed under the Kentucky Proud brand.

In his prior career he did legal work for Super Value in Chicago. A regional manager from their Save-a-Lot division has approached him with the offer to provide the distribution logistics, if the producing farmers can be identified and provide a reliable level of supply. This could go to markets in Louisville, Lexington, Knoxville, Nashville and Cincinnati. Providing this level of supply, especially if the product were organic, could allow the farmers to obtain a super premium price.

A number of regional restaurants are buying Kentucky Proud products now. He would be interested in working with the KAC to identify a demonstration project. The Innovation and Commercialization Center (ICC, under Mr. Mooers) is providing entrepreneurial training for the Regional Stewardship Council. Shadur wonders whether they could provide a training module for farmers on sustainable farming? A project like that could receive regional grant funds – or the KAC could apply for such funds for a specific initiative.

Some discussion was made regarding an EKU unique program of "Educational Extension Agents", who represent "boots on the ground" to work with the Regional Stewardship Program on issues such as community-school partnerships and community capacity building.

Additional discussion focused on EKU's Continuing Education programs, including grants they have received from USDA for distance learning and telemedicine. This is an area that KAC could help publicize.

Also discussed was an environmental research initiative being undertaken by Tammy Horn with respect to bee hive colonies.

The meeting concluded with a discussion of ways in which the KAC could help get more agricultural people involved with the Regional Stewardship Program, including possibly having an individual nominated to the ECU president who could be appointed to the Advisory Board, as well as identifying produce farmers that could work with Save-a-Lot out of Winchester. In general there was a strong interest in working with the KAC to identify one or more pilot projects.