

Meeting Highlights: Rural Communities Committee

Guest: Al Cross, Director, U of K Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues

Location: Kentucky Cattlemen's Association Office

December 7, 2009

Committee Chair Robert Monk welcomed Mr. Cross and also a number of KAC members from other KAC committees who were attending this meeting as guests. (All KAC members were invited to attend, due to the wide interest in Mr. Cross's work across the state.) Mr. Monk asked each member to introduce themselves, citing their organization and identifying one or two issues of interest to them that they would like Mr. Cross to address.

The following is a partial list of issues identified by the attendees:

- What is the world outside of Ag talking about?
- "Off-farm Income"
- How to get the message across about the economic development opportunities associated with dairy farming.
- A view that "rural development" is "ag development at its finest"; how to avoid bedroom community syndrome.
- The need for a unified voice, unified message to legislators, the media and the public.
- The need to avoid silos.
- Strengthening our leadership focus.
- Recognition for the \$300 million that has been invested from the Ag Development Fund, as important economic development for rural communities; improving access to capital for beginning farmers, helping ensure the next generation of farmers can get started.
- Focus on developing entrepreneurship among farmers as a way for them to supplement farm income.
- How to preserve a rural way of life; Kentucky is an agrarian state, it is what we do best!
- How to get ahead of the curve and protect our most productive areas in perpetuity.
- A desire for agricultural groups to draw strength through partnerships with each other.

Mr. Cross provided some personal background on his growing up on a farm, where the farm was not the primary source of family background. He was in 4H and later went to Western Kentucky University in Journalism. At one time he tried to create a vegetable co-op. After many years of work covering rural issues at the Courier Journal, he left because he felt that after being bought by a national company they abandoned their state-wide role, closing all their satellite office across the state.

In his current role at U of K, he plays a role as “Extension Agent for Rural Journalism”, though this is not officially part of the Rural Extension Service. The Institute is a national program and he referred committee members to his website. It’s focus is on newspapers with circulation of 30,000 or less, plus some rural TV stations, and on the following issues:

- Education
- Healthcare
- Environment
- Economic Development

Among these, healthcare and economic development receive the greatest attention.

In general he discussed the decline of rural newspapers. The result is there is sometimes no voice to raise issues that need attention. At the same time, from a financial standpoint the remaining rural newspapers are doing much better than large urban newspapers, because they are run very efficiently, have loyal advertisers and have much less debt. He noted that the Lexington Herald remains much more focused on coverage of rural issues, which he attributes to the fact that Lexington remains a strong retail market for Eastern Kentucky shoppers.

It is difficult for smaller newspapers to write about larger issues because in addition to not having sufficient staff, frequently the news sources are not responsive to their requests for interviews. Only half of Kentucky newspapers have an editorial page, and even among those many do not take stands on controversial issues. He is trying to encourage more of these papers to step to the plate and take positions on important issues, particularly rural economic development.

A high percentage of rural newspapers (55%) are now owned by chains; they tend to go to the strongest markets, avoid the smaller towns. One example cited would not go to a community unless they could get a minimum of \$1 million / year in revenue.

Within economic development, the issues have changed. “Cheap labor” is gone, now all overseas, and “incentive wars” among states and regions have neutralized the natural advantages that some areas had. This has led to a “race to the bottom”. Healthcare is a critical aspect of rural economic development because employers don’t want to locate in an area where workers, on average, are less healthy.

Three well-defined principles of rural economic development are:

- Build on existing assets
- Encourage cooperation across county lines
- Encourage entrepreneurship

In rural areas, we frequently don’t have a good handle on our assets. Competition among Counties is the greatest challenge of these three (the “Friday Night Syndrome”).

The smaller the county the worse the sense of competition; he has observed that counties appear to need a population of at least 20,000 to begin to rise above these rivalries. Several examples around Kentucky were cited where cross-county cooperation is strong. Mr. Cross urged the KAC to help beat the drum to encourage counties to work together on economic development projects. He notes that in Tennessee, which has 95 counties, the governor has tried to force counties to work together in clusters. He wonders if we can copy this approach.

Regarding “entrepreneurship”, he feels we may need a different word that is not so fancy. He cited several positive examples of rural entrepreneurship, including Sharon Burton’s founding of the Farmers’ Pride newspaper, and Green County, which has an incubator that has created 45 jobs. This may be a good lesson for other small communities. We need to encourage young people to become entrepreneurs. Junior Achievement is an excellent model program that could be emulated.

Mr. Monk noted that the Ag Development Fund gave grants of up to \$2 million to the national FFA, part of which are being used to promote entrepreneurial education. Kentucky FFA is now a leader in this.

Mr. Cross believes that over many years, the tobacco support program suppressed the entrepreneurial spirit because it was too easy to make money just growing tobacco. He would like to see more effort go into creating an inventory of entrepreneurial opportunities. However, access to capital will remain a problem for start-up businesses. The U of K College of Agriculture used to have regional economic development specialists, but this ended 15 – 20 years ago. There are still a couple designated economic development agents, and U of K President Todd has created a mandate that extension agents should become more economic development focused.

A committee member raised the importance of local bankers in this context. Fewer banks have staff who understand agricultural banking issues.

In today’s world, environmental issues are increasingly a problem for agriculture. It is partly a matter of perceptions held by people outside of agriculture. It is especially a problem for all aspects of animal agriculture, coupled with the concerns of Animal Rights groups.

Mr. Cross recommended that the KAC meet with Laura Skillman at the University of Kentucky, who runs the “Ag Media” program. She may be a helpful advisor to the KAC for its public awareness agenda.

Mr. Cross suggested we help shape the message for rural editors as follows:

Agriculture is an interesting subject

Everybody eats

There’s a growing interest in the environmental aspects of agriculture.

Dr. Will Snell called attention to the importance of the “grow local” movement: Kentucky can be more competitive in this arena than many other states.

Other committee members suggested that agriculture needs more press, but the press won’t cover it. A discussion followed about whether ag organizations and leaders can write more press releases, and if so, will it increase the amount of coverage? Mr. Cross noted that “Ag doesn’t sell newspapers”. He provided more background about the role of newsletters and articles drafted by Ag Extension Service agents. They regularly prepare materials for distribution, however they may need assistance in terms of selecting topics, finding stories that will get noticed and have impact. He suggested this is an area that the KAC could work on with the Extension Service and/or through Ms. Skillman.

Among topics Mr. Cross agreed have not received sufficient coverage are the forestry aspects of agriculture. Mrs. Jones noted other Ag issues that deserve more attention include healthcare and the environment (including protection of open space, wildlife habitats and forests), and farm-to-school programs.

Mr. Cross has reviewed the KAC strategic plan section on Rural Communities in preparation for meeting with the committee. He encouraged the KAC to continue to promote the “regional angle”, cooperation across county lines. In general, he agrees with the KAC’s goal of having more agricultural representative engaged in civic affairs.

Regarding the strategy’s concern with sprawl, he is pessimistic, noting that leaders have a reluctance to have any kind of planning or zoning in some counties. One county he cited is currently debating whether to have any planning board at all. In his view, the Kentucky Chapter of the American Planning Association is not effective at a grass roots level. He wishes local newspapers would raise the profile of this issue.

Committee Chair Robert Monk asked Mr. Cross what the KAC can do to get more media attention for its priority issues. And, how do we get “Ag” to be more a part of the rural development thought process? Mr. Cross responded that as a journalist, he cannot carry “PR messages” to his constituencies; however he can help coach us regarding resources and channels that can be more effective. He noted again that the University of Kentucky have some 30 people working in Ag-related PR, and the Extension Agents turn out a column each week for publication in local media. He noted that there are different kinds of Extension Agents with expertise in many different fields. Also, he advises newspaper editors not to segregate all agricultural news or information into one section or page, but to distribute it throughout the paper. Some of this material belongs on the Front Page, not the “Ag Page”.

Chairman Monk led a wrap-up period with all the committee members to get their ideas for additional steps the KAC might take or issues to address. Items suggested by committee members included the following:

- Give producers more tools to allow them to have a stronger media voice.
- A need for stronger leadership in the agricultural community – we relied so long on tobacco as our message.
- Let non-ag people know what is going on, what is happening to rural communities; help them understand they are affected by it.
- This discussion has confirmed many points we already knew – it is very difficult, especially the transition away from tobacco, underlying problems for young farmers, lack of capital, and in part, a diminished work ethic.
- Tobacco still has a strong hold on us.
- How to help Eastern Kentucky? How to tap timber resources? There is a need for more leadership in that industry.
- An awareness from this discussion of “health” as a locational factor for businesses.
- An outcome of the economic crises has been getting people closer to food sources through gardening.
- The importance of education, and promoting agriculture; U of K’s role and focus in this, its focus on economic development and job-creation both on and off-farm.
- The challenge to the KAC of promoting teamwork, of coming up with a gameplan to move us forward on these issues.
- How to promote communication, but as a 2-way street: Ag needs to listen as well as work to get its message across. Listen to the public’s concerns about how animals are cared for; need for Ag to “police itself” so “bad players” aren’t the message.
- Support the writers in our midst! Find the good messengers in our midst.
- Counties that are successful have strong local leadership and do cooperate across county lines – more of that is occurring; people need to take note and talk about it – the economic development community is talking about it. Some counties are afraid to lose their identity, but their residents are driving 20-30 miles to jobs, which is causing barrier to break down.

Chairman Monk summarized by saying these comments reinforce his sense that the KAC’s strategic plan is on target, our agenda is accurate and we should continue to pursue our focus on regional planning.

Mr. Cross closed by noting that the University of Kentucky has a role to play in many facets of our strategy, as do the State’s other universities. The Appalachian Center is one example. In general there is a lack of good research that shows what works in rural economic development – so much of what works is unique to local conditions.