

Strengthening Michigan's Economy: Roles for the Michigan Agricultural Experiment Station and MSU Extension

Findings from Citizen Focus Groups

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In the fall of 2005, four focus groups were held in various locations across the state to help MSU Extension (MSUE) and Michigan Agricultural Experiment Station (MAES) better understand issues, needs, and concerns of Michigan's residents. This effort to gather feedback from people who were not familiar with the two organizations was part of a comprehensive issue identification and planning effort--*Strengthening Michigan's Economy: Roles for MAES and MSUE*. The four focus group sessions were held in Lansing, Detroit, Paw Paw, and Clare.

The findings

The more frequently mentioned issues included jobs and the economy, education (pre-school, K-12, college/university/technical), health care and insurance, better opportunities for youth, and quality of the environment.

- Jobs and the economy included topics of low minimum wage, workforce development and retraining for manufacturing skilled workers, lack of jobs in rural areas, time of finding a job increasing, households adjusting to lower paying jobs, small business assistance, and entrepreneurship.
- Education topics included children not being adequately educated for future jobs, reduction of music and art programs, allocation of building funds to new facilities rather than existing facilities, and the rising cost of higher education.
- Health care was often a job-related issue (coverage, employee cost) and participants of all ages were concerned about prescription drug coverage and costs particularly for the elderly.
- Participants expressed deep concern about family well being, focusing especially on parenting and youth development. They desire that youth have strong, positive role models in school, out-of-school, summer activities, jobs at appropriate ages, and stable family environments.
- Under the topic of environmental quality, recycling and disallowing out-of-state garbage were frequently mentioned. Overall, participants were supportive of a clean environment that would provide a high quality of life for recreation and tourism and clean water and air.
- Given the timing of these focus groups, when gas prices were high (\$2.50 gallon) and there was talk about high winter heating bills, energy prices were a strong concern for households. The overall Michigan economy's dependence on car manufacturing and tourism was discussed. Alternative fuels from agriculture were discussed as a possible solution.
- Comments were also made about local and state government services that ranged from high taxes, exercising one's voting right, and security concerns, to reduced funding which has put many at risk for health, housing, and education access and services.
- Crime and transportation (poor road conditions) were two issues unique to the Detroit participants
- As for future opportunities, participants see a different economy for Michigan's future. In Paw Paw, health care, food production, and recreation and tourism were

mentioned as areas of potential growth. In Clare, recreation and tourism, education, and resource industries were named as possibilities for growth. In Lansing, manufacturing, tourism and community engagement were the sectors identified for future growth. In Detroit, real estate development, entrepreneurial activities, and improved education and environmental conditions were mentioned as areas for future economic opportunities.

- A final finding of these focus groups was that research and higher education were perceived as positive contributors to the state's economy. Some had direct experience with this through their own education or their children's, while others who have younger children were concerned about the financial resources needed to provide a higher education.
- Awareness of Extension, Experiment Station and 4-H was low when these residents were asked to mention the community programs and providers that they were familiar with in their county. These findings suggested that we clearly had non-customers of Extension and Experiment Station in attendance. But most importantly, we learned that many of their issues are topics currently being addressed by MSU, MAES and MSUE. Enhanced promotional efforts and distribution channels to reach un-served publics are necessary as these two organizations plan for the future.

The methodology

Prior to these focus group sessions, several general population telephone studies were conducted over the past five years to rate issues areas where MSUE and MAES currently invest state and federal resources. The four focus groups provided additional thoughts on those issues, as well as other topics that are on resident's minds. The findings from these discussions provided a set of themes for an on-line survey that will be available to all MSU faculty and academic staff during the winter of 2006.

The firm, Capital Research, recruited focus group participants from existing lists of residents willing to participate in research. Individuals recruited were diverse in age, gender, employment, race/ethnicity, and location of residency (urban, suburban, rural). Participants were compensated for their time. To understand the interests of residents living in urban areas, focus groups were held in Lansing and Detroit. Lansing participants lived in the metropolitan area, whereas Detroit participants lived only in the city. The two other focus groups were held in areas determined to be more rural. Clare and Paw Paw drew participants from rural counties, with some participants living in small cities. In total 36 residents attended the focus groups with each focus group hosting between 8 and 11 participants.

Dr. Christine Vogt, a faculty member in the MSU Department of Community, Agriculture, Recreation and Resource Studies, moderated three of the sessions. Richard Wooten, Wayne County Extension Director, moderated the Detroit session. Sessions were taped and transcribed; anonymity was promised to all participants. Not until the very end of the session was MSU, Extension or Experiment Station revealed as the sponsor for this effort. Otherwise it was not clear "who" was asking residents to discuss issues and opportunities in the state of Michigan.