**ISU Extension in Cerro Gordo County**

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ISU Extension and Outreach provides educational opportunities for economic development, food and the environment, health and well-being, and K-12 youth outreach. We meet local needs, so Cerro Gordo County can be an even better place for the next generation.

Dean Weber  
*Extension Council Chair*

Jerry Chizek  
*Regional Director (Interim)*

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**Economic Development**

The year in economics was largely defined by the climate of our agricultural base. The challenges the year brought through global commodity prices, the new farm bill, land values, as well as livestock and crop disease contributed to shaping our north Iowa agricultural landscape in ways that will continue to impact us through 2016 and beyond. Some of the ways that our Extension office helped address these issues were through programs such as the annual Crop Advantage Series, numerous farm bill workshops, crop clinics, farm leasing meetings, and programs of specific issues such as cover crop management and water quality. These programs are all designed to provide farmers and other Ag professionals with information to help them make the best decisions for their operations.
While perhaps not as exciting as other programs that have come out of the Extension offices, the **Tax Preparation Assistance program** led by our own Human Sciences Specialist, Brenda Schmitt and her band of VITA (Volunteer Income Tax Assistance) folks touched the financial lives of over 330 households; 220 households through the Cerro Gordo office alone. And that is exciting!

This program provided tax preparation assistance to low-to-moderate wage earners free of charge, providing invaluable assistance for those who otherwise would be paying for this help or struggling to sort out tax law on their own. Extension offices across the region will continue to offer this service through the 2016 tax season.

**Health and Well Being**

The health and well-being of Iowans is always of paramount importance to those of us working in Extension. In north Iowa we have put our efforts into strengthening partnerships with organizations such as the Cerro Gordo Public Health Department, Crisis Intervention Center, Aging Services Coalition of North Iowa, and others to better understand how we can leverage the resources that ISU Extension and Outreach can provide with more effective delivery modes offered through these local agencies. This past year we were able to assist with planning for promoting nutrition programs, programs of local interest to assisted living centers, program planning for underserved populations, and ways that we can better position ourselves in the coming year to work with these groups.

This year, our office was able to partner with the Mason City Community School District to offer the **“Pick a Better Snack”** program in the classrooms of more than 340 2nd grade school children.

Developed through a partnership with the Iowa Department of Public Health, Iowa State University, and others, the program is designed to showcase healthy and nutritious snack alternatives in a fun and creative way, providing opportunities to sample fruits and vegetables and involve youth in games and activities they can share with their families and friends, leading to a lifetime of healthy choices.

We are hopeful that we will be able to expand the program to include other schools within the county in 2016-17.

**Food and the Environment**

The Iowa State University Extension and Outreach - Cerro Gordo County, Mason City/Blue Zones Project®, the City of Mason City, and the Mason City Community School District, we were awarded a $75,000 matching grant from the **Wellmark Foundation** to establish an instructional greenhouse at Lincoln Intermediate School and install better water access to both the Willow Creek and Garden Acres community gardens. Through this matching grant, the total amount will be $150,000 in cash and in-kind contributions for the project. Plans for construction are underway and will continue through 2017.
Through the entire season, we heard positive comments from not only the gardeners in the project, but from many people who live in the community.

Comments include how great the gardens look, what a fine project this is, and what a great testament to the City of Mason City and its commitment to a healthier community. While the expansion of the project now in its third year is impressive, the unsolicited positive comments from the general community regarding the overall enhancement of our community is most encouraging.

Although much more difficult to quantify than numbers of plots and gardeners involved, this anecdotal feedback is strong evidence that we are doing the right thing right.

The environment always provides opportunities to present and otherwise address issues of import for any community. This past year, the Emerald Ash Borer has offered just one of these opportunities. A joint county Emerald Ash Borer town hall meeting that included both Hancock and Cerro Gordo Counties was held in May at the Ventura Community Center.

Dr. Mark Shours provided an overview of the pest and updates on the latest treatments.

The meeting was held in response to numerous inquiries fielded by our offices and articles that have appeared in local newspapers. As the pest moves across the state, interest in this problem has escalated. This was not the last meeting on the subject for our area. Additionally, many county Extension offices are taking the time now to consider action plans for when the borer is officially sighted in their counties.

Dr. Kathann Kress, VP of Extension and Outreach and Robert Dodds, interim assistant vice president for County Services, visited Region 3 in June to talk with the regional staff about a variety of topics including programming, challenges facing our offices and programs, the future of ISUEO, as well as learn more about the idiosyncrasies of our individual offices. Dr. Kress provided great insights into how Extension and Outreach is positioned with the University, stating that we now have a presence in every college and that Iowa State University Extension and Outreach is considered the best in the country, a testament to the great work we all do every day for our communities!

Meetings such as these are a great way for our county offices to stay connected with campus, keep our perspective intact, and be assured that we do have a positive impact on Iowans.

Bus Tours

The ISUEO – Cerro Gordo County office has hosted bus tours yearly since 2009. Last year the office added a fall tour to the schedule. Interestingly, the trips have grown in popularity so much so that they are only sparsely advertised and fill to capacity within weeks of being scheduled.

The original concept of these tours was to have a very strong Master Gardener focus. It has since shifted to more of a regional Iowa focus. Through the urgings of many in ISUEO, we have redesigned these trips to showcase “gems” of Iowa for those that might not either take the time to discover these wonderful places themselves or do not know how to go about planning such an excursion on their own.

This falls’ trip included a stop at the Hawkeye Buffalo Farm, a local fall...
harvest celebration in Elkader, an apple orchard along the Mississippi, and a stop at a family-owned dairy and yogurt production facility. Through these stops, our “Extension Tourists” experienced local foods in the making, learned some history of Iowa, and gained an appreciation for how close we all live to the products we buy right here in our grocery stores.

While the impact of these tours may not be as obvious as some of the programming we do through Extension, these north Iowans grow in their appreciation of what Iowans do and the myriad reasons why we live where we do. The impact of that will manifest itself hopefully in their daily lives.

K-12 Youth and Outreach

New County Youth Coordinator for Cerro Gordo County – we are pleased to have Bobbi Jo Wild join our staff as the new CYC for Cerro Gordo.

Ms. Wild comes to the position with knowledge and experience working with South Dakota State University Extension in Brookings as an assistant program advisor for 4-H and Youth. She is also a recent graduate of South Dakota State University with majors in Agriculture Education Communication and Leadership, and Dairy Production. She began her duties June 1.

Ms. Wild hit the ground running with the North Iowa Fair falling on the heels of her first weeks on the job. While the fair only lasts a week, it can be one of the more significant youth outreach efforts taken by 4-H during the year. Bobbi Jo was able to leverage the event to garner interest in a host of activities she has initiated throughout the summer and fall. With the advent of our new CYC, we have seen a significant increase in participation and attendance at our local 4-H and other youth events. Examples of some of these successes include the Pick a Better Snack program and the Barn Quilt projects. Some of the clubs are doing a “healthy club challenge” this year. The clubs elect a “healthy living” officer and have activities/foods/presentations based on healthy living. These are just a few of the innovative programming ideas Ms. Wild is bringing to 4-H and Youth programs in Cerro Gordo County. If you haven’t done so, please take a moment to welcome Bobbi Jo into our ISU Extension and Outreach family!

Final thoughts

This year’s Stakeholder report showcases some of the programming and events that the Cerro Gordo Extension and Outreach office has initiated or otherwise supported. In September of 2016 we will be ushering in our 100th year of Extension in Cerro Gordo County.

As we anticipate this landmark in our extension journey, we look forward to new programming ideas, events, and innovative ways we can help improve the lives of Iowans in north Iowa and across the state.

We’re confident that we will meet the challenges set before us with excitement and enthusiasm that will keep us strong for the next 100 years.