

# Maintaining Support for MSU Extension in 10 Basic Steps



When county governments face serious budget challenges, they often question funding partnerships for Michigan State University (MSU) Extension offices. Although taking the actions listed below will not prevent the questions, doing so will ensure a quick mobilization of support, representative of the entire county.



**Educational programming** designed to address current community issues is the starting point in maintaining a strong Extension presence in the county. The ten steps below are dependent on the quality and breadth of Extension programming.

- 1. Explain MSU Extension and what we do concisely.** This may seem very basic but it is a crucial starting point. New staff members are introduced to the concept of personal public value statements during new staff onboarding. If you'd like a refresher or aren't familiar with this concept, read "Telling Your Extension Story Through Public Value Statements," which is also part of the *Expect to Connect Toolkit*.
  - Think about your public value statement annually, and consider rewriting it as you gain more experience and learn new skills.
  - Practice your public value statement with staff members and ask for feedback from your colleagues.
  - When talking about MSU Extension, do not speak in abbreviations and acronyms or give your title without emphasizing your organization.
  - Remember to point out that MSU Extension brings research from Michigan State University to help address local issues. Extension is funded through a three-way partnership with county, state and federal governments.
- 2. Make sure every county commissioner knows the district coordinator, some staff members and the types of programs offered locally.** It is critical that the "knowing" be a two-way relationship. It isn't sufficient that Extension staff members know who the commissioners are. The commissioners need to know the district coordinator and key staff members on a first-name basis. They need to know they can depend on MSU Extension as a resource.
  - Immediately following an election, work with your district coordinator to identify the new commissioners and their interests; develop a strategy for getting to know new commissioners and for keeping the other commissioners informed.



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- After new commissioners are elected, the district coordinator should encourage their attendance at the new county commissioner workshop; let them know about other training and other information available for public officials.
  - Take every opportunity to provide them with information that will be helpful to them as commissioners.
  - Involve commissioners in programming and events as appropriate.
  - Thank them for their support. Encourage the people who appreciate our programs to also thank the commissioners. Give the commissioners credit in every way possible.

**3. Make sure state representatives and senators know you and look to the county office as a resource for working with their constituents.** Come together as a staff to develop a strategy for regular communication with legislators. It is also important to connect with the federal legislators and their staff members.



- View building strong relationships with legislative staff members as a separate and critically important undertaking. You can't assume that a legislative aide knows about MSU Extension just because the legislator is supportive. Legislative staff members have tremendous responsibility and power to accomplish things. They also frequently stay in these roles for many years. In addition, many later run for legislative seats. They always need current, relevant, easy-to-use information to help in assisting constituents. They also frequently look for resource information and for people to serve as a sounding board on an issue.

**4. Make sure the county administrator (or coordinator, controller, manager or executive) understands the program and sees MSU Extension as a resource for county government.** Cultivate this crucial relationship in an astute manner.

- Learn about the nature of this position and try to understand the demands and pressures on someone in this role. Administrators usually are very appreciative of resources and information they can use in working with commissioners and other departments.

**5. Maintain a strong, diverse district Extension council that easily reaches into all sectors of the district.** Though managing the district council is the district coordinator's role, every staff member must help identify and recruit key community leaders to the councils. Because MSU Extension is a publicly funded organization, every county must be represented by an



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active, diverse Extension council with members who will step forward quickly and persuasively on behalf of the organization. Periodically review the list of friends and advocates on the council to be certain that they truly represent the various sectors of your community such as education, business, natural resources and agriculture as well as various ethnic and social sectors. Council members must:



- Help determine program priorities and evaluate program effectiveness, identify resources to support programming and tell others about our work. The council and Extension staff members should work together to determine the strategies for communicating with policymakers.
- Meet periodically and receive regular communications from the district office. Bringing the council members together on a regular basis allows for learning more fully about the diversity of Extension programming.

**6. Update your county presence on the MSU Extension website to reflect current programming and priorities.** Look at how your county is represented from the viewpoint of someone who wants to find out about your programs. If a legislative staff member whose legislator sits on appropriations or a county commissioner looked at your Web presence to see if this entity called Extension was worth funding, what would he or she see? Make sure you:



- Use your Web presence to accurately reflect your programming in the county.
- Keep staff member names, office hours, phone numbers and other relevant information up to date.
- Enter all programs and events in the MSU Extension Events Calendar and tag them by county.



**7. Create at least one attractively designed and well-written document that accurately explains current program priorities.**

As important as it is to have a strong Web presence, it is also imperative to have a written piece that highlights Extension's educational programming.

- Look carefully and critically at the content. Does it make a strong case for continued public funding?
  - Revise this piece periodically. Have it readily available to send out with other materials, distribute to policymakers, give out at programs and use whenever the need arises.
  - Use the county annual reports to offer other important ways to tell others about MSU Extension programming in the county.
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**8. Work consciously and constantly to ensure that the MSU Extension wordmark is highly visible.**

- Place it on signs, mailings, educational materials, presentations and more.
- Ask our partners in programming to use the MSU Extension logo on their printed pieces.



**9. Develop a good relationship with local media outlets.** The media can help you tell your story only if you tell your story to the media.

- Keep an up-to-date list of local media outlets.
- Build relationships with reporters by offering them reliable background information for new and ongoing stories.
- When appropriate, share leads for new stories.
- Share relevant news articles from the MSU Extension website.
- Encourage media to look to the county Extension office as an unbiased source of information.



**10. Be prepared to tell at least three strong stories that explain the value that MSU Extension brings to the county.** These stories should not only tell what the program is and how many people attended, but also should reflect ongoing work within the community that addresses particular issues or concerns. They should answer questions such as:

- How did research-based information make a difference?
- What role did Extension play in facilitating a process of identifying the issue, bringing people together, gathering information and encouraging action?
- What is the impact of the program?



In addition:

- Include these stories as part of the county annual report but also keep them handy as examples when talking with policymakers, the media and others.
- Make identifying such stories a regular part of staff meetings.
- Document the impact of your program in written form.

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