

# **PUBLIC POLICY EDUCATION: A PATH TO POLITICAL SUPPORT.**

by  
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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

In the late 1980s, the Cooperative Extension System faced a major challenge, the challenge of relevance in a society encountering phenomenal change.

To meet this challenge, the System initiated a number of significant actions which provided a vision, a direction for the Cooperative Extension System to flourish and continue to make a major impact on society and people's lives.

But, despite the changes in the System's programs and structures, there continues a public perception that Extension programs are the same today as they were in the early years, focused on a dwindling population of farmers and rural homemakers and no longer necessary in the rapidly changing society we live in today.

I think it's obvious to all of us that the image of Cooperative Extension today is as out of date as the image of Ozzie and Harriet as the typical American family.

*We* know we have changed. *We* know our programs are making an impact on modern problems. *We* know we have planted the seeds to enhance the status of Cooperative Extension as the most relevant educational institution in contemporary society.

But how can we convince others? How can we change our image and build stronger political support?

I believe the answer lies in accepting the challenge of Public Policy Education.

By the 1960's, the major form of citizen politics was the politics of protest people against the system, instead of creating it. It was Us versus Them.

By the 1980's, the "Me Generation" had taken over. Policy decisions were made by professional politicians influenced by powerful lobbyists and special interests. Private gain dominated over public good leveraged buyouts and bankruptcies, union-busting, the crash of the savings and loan industry, the deregulation and slow destruction of the airlines, junk bond scandals, toxic waste dumping, and a skyrocketing national debt. Voter turnout in 1988 reflected a great apathy toward citizenship.

But, 1992 may mark the beginning of a turnaround from apathy to citizen politics.

- Voter turnout last Tuesday was over 104 million people - the highest in 20 years.
  - Ross Perot's television message for reducing the deficit even though it focused on painful and unpopular tax increases got higher ratings than the World Series.
  - People were involved in town hall meetings and debates demanding discussion of issues and details, rather than personalities.
  - The people started to reject politicians' attempts to polarize issues pro-life versus pro-choice; pro-environment versus pro-economic development. While many continue to see issues as black and white, others are demanding details that show them the different shades of gray.

In the 90's, we may well see the politics of involvement not *Us versus Them*, but *We are Them*. The notion of citizen involvement to benefit the public good, the "Common Wealth," is beginning to be reborn.

The challenge of our times, then especially for Extension is to apply Jefferson's warning that we cannot be simultaneously ignorant and free to today's incredibly complex world.

### **III. WHAT IS PUBLIC POLICY EDUCATION?**

Citizen Politics means much more than just voting or writing to a legislator. It means involvement of people in public and political action to change the present and create the future. It means setting up a literacy program or a center for the elderly. It means arguing the pros and cons of expanding an airport or building a highway through a wetland.

- Public Policy Education requires new linkages and coalitions with a wide range of interest groups and organizations much wider than our traditional cooperators. No single sector government, business, non-profit or citizen/volunteer can resolve issues alone. Extension can provide the forums that bring these sectors together to address all aspects of an issue.
- Extension is the only part of the University that can provide the leadership to meet the challenge of Public Policy Education. If we meet this challenge, it is a path to political support; with politicians, with our cooperators and within the University.

**V. PATH TO POLITICAL SUPPORT** Earlier, I talked about the outdated image of Extension.

I heard a story that reminded me once again of the importance of good public relations. Moses was standing with his Public Relations man on the bank of the Red Sea. He asked the PR man what he thought about his idea to part the Red Sea and drown the Pharaoh's men as they were chasing the Israelites.

"Great!" the PR Man replied. "If you can do it I can get you five pages in the Old Testament!"

But public relations only works when you have programs that people value. If we focus on the issues that affect people, then the public, the media, and the politicians will sit up and take notice.

If we link up with new agencies and groups, and we have to, if we want to make an impact, we'll get greater citizen and organization involvement with our programs as participants, cooperators and supporters.

The benefits of an effective public policy education program also include broader support within the University. Today's complex public policy issues require that we expand our focus to include the entire range of disciplines throughout the University. We can't focus on priority issues like economic development, health care, water quality, sustainable agriculture, waste management, child care, housing, drugs, crime, urban sprawl, school dropouts, teen pregnancy, and welfare reform if we can't draw upon all the expertise of the total University.