North Carolina Cooperative Extension
Challenges to Working in an Urban Context

From February through April 2017, Kristin Feierabend, Area Agent for Urban Programs, spoke with Extension staff in urban counties across the state to understand how an urban context affects Extension engagement and what factors might limit Extension's impact in urban areas. The information summarized on the following pages was collected from 32 staff working in:

- Buncombe County
- Cabarrus County
- Durham County

- Forsyth County
- Gaston County
- Guilford County

- Mecklenburg County
- New Hanover County
- Wake County

The *National Framework for Urban Extension* outlines three key trends affecting urban areas:

- *Demographics:* Urban communities have a larger, more diverse population.
- *Community Conditions:* Urban communities face complex issues that affect multiple stakeholders and involve a high degree of politics.
- *Rural-Suburban-Urban Interdependence:* Many "urban" counties include urban, suburban, and rural populations that are integrally connected and interdependent.

How do the trends listed above affect NCCE staff working in urban areas?

- Extension is not well-known in urban areas, and many of those who are familiar with Extension associate it with rural development, traditional agriculture, and 4-H. It takes more effort to help others understand who we are, what we do, and how we are different from other organizations. It is critical to maintain a clear brand and message so that others remember us.
- Partnerships and collaboration are essential to Extension's success in urban areas. Extension is not the only game in town, so we must work with others to deliver programs and services.
- In many urban areas, Extension is just one county department out of many. On one hand, this means that Extension may not be as closely scrutinized as in smaller communities. On the other hand, Extension must compete with a range of other county departments for resources.
- Urban areas are home to a complex political landscape—intensified by a larger number stakeholders and highly interconnected issues—which can be difficult for Extension to navigate and can make it hard to access certain players (e.g. schools) and resources (e.g., County funds, grants).
- Staffing and programs must have flexibility to respond to the needs of diverse populations.
- With a large population and limited staff, programming must be "very smartly executed." Agents have to decide what they're going to focus on and stick to it. Otherwise, staff can easily be overextended and burn out quickly.

The *National Framework for Urban Extension* outlines four aspects of urban Extension that must be strengthened in order to ensure Extension's relevance and success in the long-term. Common challenges identified by NCCE staff have been organized into these four categories:

- *Positioning*: How Extension is positioned at the national, state, regional, and city level
- *Personnel*: How Extension addresses the multitude of issues and priorities in the city
- *Programs*: How Extension attracts, develops, retains, and structures competent talent
- *Partnerships*: How Extension collaborates to leverage resources for collective impact.

Challenges to Working in an Urban Context

POSITIONING

People don't know who we are or what we do.
- Extension lacks a clear and consistent message about what we do.
- Urban audiences don't see the link between Extension and the universities.
- Extension's name gets lost when we partner or collaborate with others. We're one of many players.
- Our brand has changed so many times that it's difficult for others to recognize/remember us.
- Those who are familiar with Extension associate it with "rural" or traditional agriculture.

We have to be strategic about how we communicate our mission and competitive advantage so that the County understands our role and value. This can be difficult as a non-mandated program.

PERSONNEL

The current staffing model is not responsive to a large population and diverse needs of urban counties.
- There is often an expectation that Agents can provide one-on-one support or TA to constituents. While this may be true in a rural area, this is unrealistic in a county with a large population.
- There is often an expectation that Agents will spend the bulk of their time developing and delivering educational programs. In urban areas, however, Agents may spend more time meeting with partners and working on collaborative initiatives than developing a program that they deliver themselves.
- With a high demand for services but limited staff, work-life balance can be very challenging.

Volunteers can help fill a gap in staff capacity, but current volunteer structures are not geared for an urban environment.
- Volunteer recruitment and management is easily a full-time job in urban areas, but Agents are typically responsible for this on top of other job duties.
  - Example: Extension Master Gardener Volunteers (EMGV) are critical to delivering Extension services, but the number (often 100-200) can become unwieldly in an urban setting. Hort Agents end up spending more time managing volunteers than providing services.
- Many community members are looking for short-term volunteer opportunities rather than a long-term commitment (e.g., helping with a 4-H event rather than serving as a club leader). Volunteer structures may need to be adjusted to support this.
- Advisory Councils may not be suited for an urban context. Volunteers serve on a number of other boards/committees in the community (which Extension is also involved in), so they may see the Extension Advisory Council as duplicative or unnecessary.

Staff in urban areas may need assistance building specific skills or competencies, such as:
- Grant-writing/reporting
- Evaluation (how to track impact when working with partners)
- Cultural competency/working with diverse audiences
- Using technology/social media

The cost of living is higher in urban areas, but Extension staff are paid the same regardless of geography.
- Many urban Agents cannot afford to live where they work.
- Agents will likely leave Extension if other jobs offer better pay.

PROGRAMS
Many "urban" counties include urban, suburban, and rural populations that have varying needs and interests. Agents may need to develop a wide range of programs in order to serve a broad cross-section of the county. This can be challenging given limited staff capacity.
Urban counties have seen demand for programming that addresses the following issues, but they don't necessarily have the resources, capacity or leadership support to meet that demand: • Natural resources (stormwater, erosion control) • Green industry programming • Nonprofit capacity-building • Urban agriculture • School and community gardens • Parenting • More demand for 4-H school enrichment programs instead of clubs
Urban counties are not well-equipped to work with new/non-traditional audiences. • Limited/non-existent bilingual resources • Limited support for using technology (apps, social media, online workshops, etc.) • Resources/curricula designed for rural audiences and may not be relevant to urban audiences • Resources/curricula not necessarily inclusive of urban audiences (e.g., 4-H forms ask for "home address" which may make homeless/transitional youth uncomfortable)
Urban counties are not well-equipped to support the "high-tech" element of the strategic plan. • Staff need tools and training to develop successful online programs or programs that utilize new technology. • Online registration – Extension lacks an online registration system where community members can register and pay for programs. • Laptops – some Agents have PCs instead of Macs, which are better suited for design, video editing, and virtual meetings. • Zoom is user-friendly but can only handle a limited number of participants. • NCCE's website is not useful in its current form.
Some urban Extension programs may need to charge a fee in order to support programming, but staff are unsure how to develop an appropriate fee structure.
Extension Agents are encouraged to develop programming based on community needs and individual interests/expertise, but they might benefit from borrowing/tailoring from other programs. There's not a good mechanism for sharing resources with peers, which means Agents end up recreating programs rather than tailoring existing programs.

PARTNERSHIPS
Partnerships are critical to Extension's success in urban areas, but unless we have a clear and consistent message, organizations don't know we exist or what we do.
Working in partnership can make it difficult to track our impact. • The sheer volume of people we work with makes evaluation difficult and time-consuming. • The *type* of work we do is difficult to evaluate. Agents often spend time meeting with partners and working on collaborative initiatives (vs. delivering specific programs), but there's not an effective way to capture this. • When we have trained partners or volunteers to run a specific program, we do not have an effective way—or the time—to follow up with them to understand our impact.
Urban areas have a wealth of organizations and agencies to partner with, but it can be difficult for staff to tease out quality partners from those that are unprofessional or unequipped to do the work.
In terms of university partnership, there's seems to be a lack of understanding among Specialists about Extension's engagement in urban areas. • There's a disconnect between Agents and Specialists. • The university could do a better job of staying ahead of the curve on research topics and issues of importance to urban communities (e.g., urban agriculture).
County-state partnerships come with administrative challenges, some of which can be amplified in urban areas. o Access to county/state IDs slows/limits staff productivity and opportunities for learning. o Staff who do not have access to a P-Card must pay for program materials out of their own pocket before being reimbursed. This can become burdensome to staff who are working on a limited salary.