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Community forums provide framework for improvement

During the spring and summer of 2019, the Oklahoma State University Extension worked to open the lines of communication with the people of Oklahoma. A series of public forums took place at 16 locations across the state in an effort to engage a wide range of community members.

Mike Stout, OSU Extension specialist, said the forums were a reinvention of a process OSU Extension used 20 years ago using a community informed process developed by Purdue Extension.

“We wanted to engage a wide range of participants to get their opinions and perspectives on important issues that would be represented in OSU Extension’s strategic planning,” Stout said. “Community forums took place at 16 locations across the state and more than 400 people participated.”

Participants represented OSU Extension stakeholders, local and regional governments, educational leaders, nonprofit and volunteer groups, local residents, faith-based groups, state and federal representatives and business and industry leaders.

“The participants were able to provide input into what they thought were the most important issues facing their communities right now, as well as where they were going to be over the next three to five years,” he said. “In addition, they were asked specifically about issues related to families, youth and children, as well as issues relating to their community, economy and agricultural and natural resources.”

County Extension educators will use the results from their county to engage the community in action planning around the identified issues and action ideas.

In the area of children, youth and families, one of the top issues to address was providing workforce education and financial training to increase job skills and promote economic security and prosperity. Other findings included promoting and supporting programs, education and access to resources for healthy living; and supporting life skills for strong youth, families and relationships.

Issues related to community, economy and natural/environmental resources include strengthening and growing local economies; improving water, soil, energy and natural resource conservation efforts; supporting agriculture education and promoting rural prosperity; promoting education and engagement with policymakers about local issues; and investing in resources and programs to secure the future of farming in the state.

A statewide summary, along with summaries from each county that participated, are available [online](https://extension.okstate.edu/communityforums.html).

“In terms of our next steps, we had planned to host in-person follow-up events for communities to collectively examine their results and begin planning an agenda for what will happen in the future,” Stout said. “However, since we’re in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, we won’t be hosting those in-person events. I’m currently working on trainings, resources and other materials for engaging communities virtually around the results we’ve gathered. Hopefully we’ll be able to start doing that this summer for any county OSU Extension offices that would like to host a virtual follow-up this summer in an effort to engage their communities authentically and effectively.”

For more information about the community forums, contact Stout at 918-594-8311 or the local OSU Extension office.