



New County Extension Directors Fact Sheet
Developing a County Budget Proposal

Introduction

The development and submission of an Extension budget proposal to the county commissioners is an annual task for all county Extension directors. Even though this would seem to be a fairly standardized procedure, the development and presentation of a county budget can be viewed as both an art and a science. Budget development is both a factual and intuitive process. This fact sheet is designed to share ideas that county directors may find useful in the development of the county budget.

Develop a Timetable

There are several dates that you will find to be important for the development of your county budget. While all counties' budgets begin on January 1, there is no standardized budget timetable for developing county budgets. Find out what time schedules have been used in previous years in your county. There usually is evidence of incremental changes in budget processes over time, but in many counties, the timeline changes very little from year to year.

The WSU Extension Business and Finance Office (BFO) has some dates that you need to add to your county timetable.

- The expected county contributions (the summary of salaries, benefits, goods and services and travel for the counties) are updated the first part of April of the current budget year. At that time you will know the contributions WSU Extension is making to the county and what the expected county salary contributions are.
- On December 1, both the annual county salary support form and the Memorandum of Agreement form are due in the Business and Finance Office.
- The approved county budget is due in the Business and Finance Office in early March. Once received, the Extension director sends a letter of appreciation to the county commissioners. As a county director, you can add specific details to this letter.
- Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) for the counties is due to the Business and Finance Office by March 1. All information is available on the login-protected [BFO Web site](#) that provides county contribution information for county directors.

Information You Will Need

The best place to start is with last year's budget. Estimate how much will be spent for the various line items. Were there any unusual expenses for this year? Will there be unusual expenses next

year? Are you spending approximately what the commissioners allocated, or are you developing a surplus or deficit?

You will want to establish an inflation factor for supplies, salaries, etc. In most years, three to five percent should be adequate. Your county's budget office will often provide targets that include the inflation factor for salaries and benefits. Don't get caught in the trap of not asking for adequate increases for supplies and travel lines. We can't do our work if we do not have adequate support from our county partners. You will also want to plan for scheduled replacement of office computers and equipment. If your county requires a two-year budget, carefully consider the inflation factor for year two in order to meet WSU salary contribution expectations.

Involve Others in the Process

The development of a budget should not be a secret. You will want to involve the other Extension educators and staff in your office. You may want to use your advisory council to help you build your budget, because it is extremely important that they are knowledgeable and supportive of your budget request. Typically, they will have more influence over the commissioners' decisions than you will as county Extension director.

Understand Your County's Political Protocol and Tradition

As a county Extension director, you will want to develop political savvy. Who makes the decisions in your county - the commissioners or a county administrator? Do your commissioners have budget hearings? If so, who do they want involved in the hearing? Will they be concerned with a large asking budget, or do they expect county department heads to ask for amounts larger than they think they will receive?

Be sure to follow county procedures. For some counties, all budgets and budget requests may need to be submitted through your division or department manager. Keep the manager informed and involved every step of the way. They may want to be involved in all budget hearings. In other counties, you may be the county department head and will submit your budget yourself.

Remember, many budget hearings, and your testimony, will be recorded and rebroadcast on your local government cable channel. Be well prepared for your budget hearing. Large counties may not allow department heads to meet directly with county council members during the budget season.

Where do you find all this information? You ask, you listen, you observe. Talk to other department heads - maybe even talk to the commissioners themselves. As a new county Extension director, this is a perfect time to ask these questions.

Finally, don't forget to develop a strong working relationship with the clerk and secretaries in the commissioners' office. They have a better idea of what goes on "behind the scenes" than anyone else. These are folks you want "on your side."

You need to know that the Extension budget is sometimes combined with other line items, such as Parks and Recreation, fair board, etc. Also, from the commissioners' standpoint, Extension budgets are very complicated in their cost shares, and other details. Commissioners understand

(although may not entirely accept) that the Extension budget is more of a contract for services than other county budget items. In other words, commissioners approve a total budget but do not have direct control on exactly how the budget is spent.

This can be a touchy point with some commissioners who are used to approving incidental expenses for many other county offices. Also, be aware that sometimes Extension gets “missed” in the budgeting process. As a county Extension director, you will need to stay alert to determine whether you are receiving the proper letters, requests for budget hearings, etc. Again, a good relationship with the commissioners’ staff may help keep you from getting overlooked.

Some Thoughts on What to Present

Many times you will receive standardized forms from the commissioners for your budget request. Try to adapt these forms or check with the commissioners’ clerk or administrator to see if you can modify the form to suit your needs. Always try to keep your budget presentation as simple and condensed as possible. As a rule of thumb, tell them everything they need to know but not necessarily more than they need to know. Always be honest and answer their questions fully. In developing the budget, you may want to avoid listing separate line items that will create controversy such as out-of-state travel, individual support staff salaries, etc. Generally, the fewer line items you have, the better.

If you are comparing your budget request to the previous year’s figures, try to use the previous budget request rather than actual dollars spent. In sharing the budget with the commissioners, try to highlight the state’s support of the county Extension program. Check with the BFO web site to access accurate data from the state for each program that is delivered in your county.

Also, remember to include grants, postage, computer and other equipment cost share, professional development dollars, etc. Acknowledge the in-kind support provided through state and federal funds and the fact that you are part of the WSU and Extension system and research base.

Finally, although impact statements are important, the budget hearing may not be the best time to try to sell the commissioners on the importance of your organization. This information should be provided to them continuously throughout the year.

Beware of the “Carryover Dilemma”

Extension offices rarely spend the exact amount appropriated by the commissioners for the calendar year. As a result, Extension offices rarely end the year with a zero balance.

If your county has accumulated funds over the years due to staff vacancies, or other factors, it is probably best to refer to these monies as “committed funds” at the end of the year. Some counties provide flexibility with these funds. Understand the philosophy of your county and explore how to use these funds to further program development in your county. Some county directors have written the ability to carry over those funds into their MOAs.

Finally, it is important to let commissioners know that every dollar they send to WSU Extension is used directly for their county Extension program. Your county line item is never mixed with other funds.

Look for Ways to Market Your Budget

Many County Extension Directors have tried to use a simple analogy to help put their budgets in perspective. One example is showing that the cost of Extension to X county families is less than one meal a year at a fast food restaurant. Simply divide your county population (or number of households) by the total budgeted amount. Another example often used is to show the amount brought from the state, federal and grant sources in comparison to the county contribution. Many commissioners are impressed with the funds generated and spent in their local communities.

Sharing programmatic impacts throughout the year with county commissioners is strongly recommended. Some commissioners are interested in seeing the inputs for our program. While it is important to share the types of information requested by the commissioners, it is also important to share the impacts of our work. It is the county directors' responsibility to teach commissioners about short, medium and long term impacts and how those impacts are positively affecting the commissioners' constituents.

Adapted from Ohio State University Extension, Orientation for New County Extension Directors, Guide Sheet #15