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## Ken Schlather

*Executive Director, Cornell Cooperative Extension, Tompkins County*

I am the Executive Director of Tompkins County Cooperative Extension, and I have served in that capacity since September 2003. I came to Extension in a circuitous way.

**INTERVIEWED BY** Almost everything that I have ever done in my life, I have done following my gut as opposed to following my head, including coming to

**Scott Peters**

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Extension. I had been working internationally for about 20 years. Since the time I finished the course work and the actual research for my Ph.D in 1994, I had been thinking that eventually I would like to come back to the U.S. and work in upstate New York. I came to know over time that I wanted to work with a non-partisan organization. I wanted to work in economic development, and I wanted to work with an organization that really focused on strengthening individuals and communities, because I was interested in building democracy at a local level.

Along with other people, I spent several years working on rural development program evaluations in different parts of Central and South America. A group of us exchanged notes, and thought it would be interesting to look at what it was that we found to be the basic components, the basic ingredients, of successful rural development projects. The things that kept coming up again and again in all of our reports of those successful projects were that local people had taken control of their situation. They had identified the priority issues. They had set their priorities in



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terms of what they wanted to work on. They were the ones who came up with the ways that they were going to address issues. They may have had help in doing that, but essentially the ways they addressed issues were their own solutions based on their experience and their knowledge of situations. Therefore they bought into the solutions.

There was also a literal buying in. Although it wasn't necessarily always the case, the initiatives that tended to be more successful were the ones where there was money on the table coming from a local institution, like a local government, a church, a tribe or some sort of entity that these people belonged to or had some connection to. Then, they were drawing on outside resources on their terms. Those resources were either knowledge or money or other in-kind things. Those things were basically brought in on the terms of the people who were running the show, which to me, in a nutshell, describes Cooperative Extension. As I looked more and more closely at what I might want to do, it just seemed so natural that I would move and take a job with Cooperative Extension. I originally figured that I would take a job in something that was related to agriculture, since my field of study is crop science, soil science, and horticulture. I'm not quite sure when the transition came to thinking about applying for an Executive Director position.

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I grew up in Elyria Ohio, a small town in Lorain County outside of Cleveland, Ohio. The Ohio Extension Service is in Lorain County, and I think the first name of the Extension agent there was Jerry. I can't remember his last name but that tells you something that I remembered his first name. My father probably called Cooperative Extension once or twice since he was raising a lot of apples, although not for a living. I remember where the office was but it wasn't an organization that I really gravitated towards then. In fact, I was growing vegetables organically back in the 1960's, when probably Cooperative Extension wasn't the strongest proponent of organic agriculture. There was kind of a push-pull relationship there. I actually did work for the Utah State Cooperative Extension Service in a soils lab when I finished my undergraduate degree. I was offered continuing work there but I turned it down.

I really had no desire to work for Cooperative Extension. I think it was be-

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cause of the name. It just didn't seem like something that I was particularly interested in. It seemed somewhat boring. It wasn't something that I thought I would want to do. That's really basically out of ignorance. The name doesn't tell you anything for most people. There was nothing about it that seemed exciting to me when I left college.

I went to college as an undergraduate at Utah State. I never really knew what I had majored in until I graduated. I thought I had finished a single degree in something related to plant science, and it turned out that it was a double major, something related to plant science and horticulture. I was never really into school.

I finished my undergraduate degree, left Utah, and came back to Ithaca. I was here in Tompkins County farming back in the late 1970s and beginning of the 1980s. My brother went to law school at Cornell, so I visited here sometimes. In high school, I would come here on occasion during the summers to spend time. I had another brother here who was interested in starting up a roadside stand as a market, a truck farming thing. So I committed to doing that, and at the same time when I was finishing up college, I had applied to the Peace Corps. I wasn't planning on it but it was something that I had thought of even back when I was in fifth and sixth grade. I was accepted into a program, but I couldn't take it because I had made this commitment to come back to Ithaca, or outside of Ithaca, and farm. So, I farmed here for two summers, or almost two summers, and then I joined the Peace Corps and went to Asia. I was in Asia for eight years before coming back here for graduate school at Cornell.

I had vowed when I was here farming that I would never go to school at Cornell. I didn't go as far as saying I would never work for Cooperative Extension. I said that I am never going to Cornell, because the people there were stuck up and had a tremendous amount of arrogance. I wasn't particularly interested in coming here to go to school, because I was associating with people of the town and there was this obvious love/hate relationship with Cornell.

But I did end up going to graduate school at Cornell. When I was in the Philippines, I met a Cornell graduate from the Education Department, who did a Ph.D. in Education. He was Indian, from Goa. He was just raving about Cornell. Eventually I started working for him in the Philippines. Our deal was that he would help me get into Cornell, if I would basically work with him for slave labor wages. That's eventually what happened. In fact, Cornell was the only graduate school I applied to because I knew even before I met him that I had changed my mind about Cornell. I appreciated and was particularly interested in being able to use Cornell's library. Being out in the middle of the villages in Asia, where you had access to no information, really caused me to appreciate the library. Just thinking about the

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library, Mann Library, was absolutely incredible. It's a huge resource.

I started my graduate study in spring semester of 1989. I did my Masters with Jane Mt. Pleasant, who at the time was an untenured professor in the Soil, Crop and Atmospheric Sciences Department. And then, I went straight on, and did my Ph.D. with John Duxbury in Soil Science. I had done all my coursework for my Ph.D. before I finished my Masters thesis. I finished my Masters thesis and literally the day I turned it in, I was on the plane for Costa Rica to do my Ph.D. research. That was in 1991, maybe 1992. I finished my research in 1994. I was doing research for two years down in Costa Rica. I came back here and worked with a group of graduate students who started up a program called the Mulch Based Agriculture Program. I spent a lot of time working with that particular program and was writing my dissertation on the side. I finished the dissertation, or most of it, by 1996, though I don't think I officially graduated until 1998.

All the time that I was working on my dissertation, I was still back in Central America. I came up here, stayed about a year, a little less than a year, and then I was back down in Central America again. I continued my research in Central America on soils and nutrient cycling. I did a post doc in nutrient cycling. Then I worked in different parts of Central and South America with different universities as part of this Mulch Based Agriculture Program. In 1998, the year that Hurricane Mitch hit Honduras, I basically went there and volunteered. Eventually I began working there in disaster response, which involved post-hurricane rehabilitation of damaged areas. That grew into work in disaster planning with local governments and local people: planning for disasters and post-disaster responses.

I moved from there into work with FAO (the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations) on a fairly large program around food security in Central America across four countries. I worked with local organizations and national governments to develop national-level policies aimed at improving food security that were grounded in local experience.

In the meantime, my wife and I had kept a house here. So it was here whenever we came back from Central America. Throughout the 1990s, the mid 1990s on, I was thinking some day when I decide to finish my work overseas, I'll come back to Ithaca and central New York and work in development. It was in 2002 that I actually began to think seriously about working here. So, I began to look at jobs in the Cooperative Extension system and in other places, just keeping an eye out for jobs, and one turned up in Tompkins County.

The interview for the job was interesting on a whole bunch of different levels. I mean I was in the middle of some pretty intense work in Nicaragua, working with people at the national level, as well as local people, World Bank people, and others.

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I was also speaking a different language, not using English much, so my English felt a little rusty. I came up here, got off the plane, and literally the next day I was in an interview for the position. In some respects it was like applying for a job in a different culture. I've done a lot of different jobs in a lot of different places, and I've interviewed for many different things, so it was just another interview for a job that I really wanted.

In the course of the interview, I sensed that Tompkins County Cooperative Extension was in a good place. I didn't sense there was need for change within the organization. The Association has, and has had, a very good reputation. In fact,

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when I talked to people from other parts of the state they would say, "Oh there's Cooperative Extension and then there's Tompkins County Cooperative Extension." When they say that, they mean that things were done, lots of times, differently here, that we had a lot of programs that weren't tra-

ditional or conventional programs for Cooperative Extension, whether in 4-H, agriculture, or other areas. The staff enjoyed a very good reputation for being innovative. They had a really good reputation here in the county. Before I interviewed for the job, I talked to a lot of people in the county who I thought would be potential partners if they weren't already partners with Cooperative Extension, to see what their perceptions were of the organization. I talked to people to find out what Cooperative Extension's reputation was, but more importantly, I wanted to find out whether people would have an interest in working with Extension.

My view of Cooperative Extension is that there's a design. The design is what's so powerful about the system. It recognizes and incorporates into its work the same principles that we found so important elsewhere. It was for me a very powerful piece that those are basically built by design into the Cooperative Extension system. Those principles include local control, local people setting their own priorities, local people designing the solutions or the responses to the issues that they have identified, local people putting their own resources on the table, and then drawing on the knowledge from universities or from people who aren't necessarily part of that particular community. These principles are in the design of the Cooperative Extension System. I didn't expect people outside of Cooperative Extension to understand those things, but it was important to me that there at least be some actors here in the community who would have an interest in working with Cooperative Extension.

So, the reputation of Tompkins County Cooperative Extension was good. They

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had a reputation for good solid programs and for being innovative. People spoke very highly of Cooperative Extension in the community. In this sense, the organization was in very good shape. The only crisis was something that wasn't there when I was interviewing, but it was there a month later. It was the threat from the county to cut the funding by as much as 50 to 100 percent. I volunteered here for two weeks before I actually took the job to work just on that particular issue. I focused on beginning to develop a defense strategy, if you will, for how to go about convincing the legislature that they really didn't want to cut Cooperative Extension. The budget from the county for the Association was about \$580,000, which was about 20 percent, of the total operating budget. There were about 55 staff at that time.

The county was faced with a 46 percent tax increase. They told their departments to look at something like a 10–15 percent across the board cut and determine what that would mean. They asked the agencies that were not county agencies but that were funded by the county to develop scenarios based on 50 and 100 percent cuts in county funding. For Cooperative Extension, the 100 percent cut meant, this was our joke, we'll just hand them the keys to the place and tell them to keep on paying the mortgage. We'd have to close. We could withstand a 50 percent cut, but it would have been extremely difficult.

In response to this situation, we decided to be as transparent as possible about how we spent county money. There was a lot of value that Cooperative Extension was producing that wasn't recognized. I thought of the kinds of value that we were producing in three ways. We saved money for the county government in terms of their own budget by reducing expenses for things that they would have spent money on or we added to their county budget bottom line by increasing sales tax in certain areas. We have a positive impact on the county economy that can be measured in terms of jobs in the sectors we work in, say in agriculture and horticulture, and in terms of jobs that we create ourselves. Third, we have a huge impact on all the things that people call quality of life. It's called quality of life because it's very difficult to measure. As soon as it's able to be measured, people move it out of

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the quality of life column and into the economic development column. So we looked at those three things, and we developed clear numbers, program by program, that were conservative. The idea was, if anybody looked at the numbers and thought that they were wrong, they would think they were wrong because they were too low, not too high. Therefore, if somebody knew something about a particular topic, and was looking at the numbers, they saw that we were actually very low. Then our credibility with them would be enhanced when they looked at any other number on our table. So we kept numbers low. We also showed people exactly how we got the numbers using a lot of footnotes. It was done so that the numbers were all on one page. We used a column or a table that was not unattractive. We backed up all that data with footnotes that were organized in such a way that it was easy for people to find the information they wanted to.

We had a column for quality of life, and we talked about what a particular program was doing in terms of quality of life. We explained overall that quality of life involved situations where there is economic value, but it's extremely difficult to measure and people could look at it for what it was worth. They could say there's some value to it, or they could say there wasn't. An example of a quality of life factor is an attractive environment to live in. Cooperative Extension runs a community beautification program that is a basis for tourism, it stimulates sales of vegetables or flowers for the local horticulture industry, and it also creates a better place for people to live. That's the quality of life issue. I'm sure there's economic value there but it's difficult to measure.

We also had a fourth category, and we presented it more or less as "people vote with their feet." If we're getting a lot of people coming to our programs and we're getting a lot of people volunteering with us, that's a huge sign that people value what it is that we're doing. In our case in Tompkins County, the numbers are very large. We have almost 30 percent of the population participating in our programs. To be able to say that is pretty huge, and then to be able to point out how many volunteers we have, around 2,000 people. We had numbers to back it up. 2,000 volunteers and the total amount of effort that they were putting in was about 70,000 hours a year, the equivalent of about 35 people working full time. Being able to go in and say those things to the county was powerful. We knew some people were "numbers people," and we also knew other people were "stories people," so we had both, numbers and stories.

We were funded, without a cut, and that outcome was in large part due to the presentation. Four different legislators said ours was the best presentation of any agency that they had ever seen. They said they felt, as a result of the presentations, that this was the first time that they had a good sense of what it was that Coopera-

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tive Extension was doing here.

There are five main program areas that we work in: agriculture and the environment; 4-H youth development; consumer and financial management education; nutrition and family; and community development. The programs include very traditional things that people think of when they think of Cooperative Extension, like 4-H with animals and work with commercial farmers. But we also do work with green building, education on renewable energy and other energy use alternatives, and local foods promotion. There's a whole network now that's been built up by Monica Roth called the Finger Lakes Culinary Bounty, which is a combination of chefs and producers of local high quality produce that the chefs use in their restaurants to promote the cuisine of the Finger Lakes region.

We also do lead and radon issues and youth tobacco abuse education. In each of the middle schools in the towns, we have program managers who are there for after-school programs with rural and at risk youth. We have a similar program in the urban area of the county, and we have just started one at a mobile home park, which was organized and started by a student from Cornell with support from us. There's also the youth community action program, which was originally set up over in Buffalo. Now we're doing some of that programming here. The program involves providing youth a stronger voice by having them analyze situations that concern them locally and begin addressing those same issues for themselves. And then we have a set of energy programs including a rather large program started by Ann Gifford. She has taken some of the work that she had been doing on energy efficiency and has turned that into a statewide program, with two-hour workshops that are done now in 33 different counties in the state. So, we're working on energy efficiency here at the local level, and she's managing this programming at the state level.

You can see that there is really quite a range of programs here, and the funding comes from a variety of sources. A little more than 20 percent of the funding comes from the county through their appropriation, and roughly an equivalent amount comes from the county for other things that we do on contract with them. About 35–40 percent of our funding comes from outside the county from non-federal and non-state sources, and we have some state and federal funding as well. The federal funding is quite small, and the state funds support programs that provide clear benefits to local constituents.

In addition to our on-going programming, we have been involved recently in initiating a new program focused on energy issues. That's the program I want to talk about.

With the hurricane and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, energy prices were

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skyrocketing. In August of last year, people who have interactions with Catholic Charities were buying heating oil or were trying to buy heating oil, and were just freaking out because of the price. They got in touch with Catholic Charities, and Catholic Charities got in touch with some other agencies here locally. A group of us decided it would be useful to see what we could do together to address the high cost of heating oil, which looked like a really important issue for a lot of people in the county in the winter of 2005–2006. It looked like it was going to be a choice between heating and eating for a lot of people, and it has been. It has been a choice between heating and eating because people just didn't have the high costs in their budgets.

Back in October 2005, natural gas prices were about 80 percent higher than they were the year before. Oil prices were 60 percent higher for the same period of time, and propane was just about the same. If you were going to try to do any kind of energy efficiency work where you would hire a contractor, there was no way you could do it, because every contractor was going full bore and could not take new customers. This was going to affect poor people. It was also going to affect the people in the middle and the upper middle classes for that matter because we were talking about a 50–60 percent increase in the cost for heat in the winter. In terms of an economic hit for the county, it would have been huge. It would have been around a 50 percent increase, maybe \$15–20 million additional cost of money being sent out of the county.

There were about eight organizations involved in developing a response to this situation: the Department of Social Services of the county government; the County Office for the Aging, which is another county government agency; Catholic Charities; Tompkins Community Action, which is the local CAP (Community Action Program) agency; Cooperative Extension of Tompkins County; and Neighborhood Legal Services. These groups were brought together by the Human Services Coalition, which is a consortium promoted or initiated by the county government 30 years ago to have county non-profit and human service agencies coordinate and work closely with each other. The Coalition convened the first set of meetings. Cooperative Extension brought to the table our strong, expert background in education and a pretty good knowledge of the issues around energy and energy efficiency.

We decided there were three basic things that we could do. First, we could identify all the resources that existed in the county that people could use for emergency assistance around heating, like HEAP (Home Energy Assistance Program), and other energy programs. We could organize this information in such a way that it would be easy for people to see what they qualified for, who was providing it, and

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how to reach the providers. Then we could get this information into the hands of people who would need it. The second thing was to subsidize the fuel costs that people were going to be incurring. If you could get the people who need it to reduce their other household costs, that would free up more money to buy fuel oil and natural gas. So we looked at work we had been doing previously for the same group, through programs that that put money in people's pockets for things like health, dental care, childcare, food, and so on. Our idea was to find those resources that people could use to subsidize their other household costs, so they could shift money over to pay for energy. The third thing we could do was to help people reduce energy consumption, which would clearly benefit them. We couldn't do anything about the fact that there weren't any contractors available, but what we could do was identify low-cost and no-cost things that people could do to reduce their energy bill. We came up with a list of eighteen things, and began to think about how we could get this out to people.

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We were also interested in two other things. Because of my background in disaster management and disaster response, we thought this situation was just a huge opportunity for really helping people to grow together, to unite together around a common theme, a common issue. Through working on that issue, they could begin to develop and strengthen their own networks in their communities and their own leadership skills. Then we, or any other community-based group, could work with them in other ways in the future. We were talking about anybody who would step up to the plate in their own community who wanted to work on this issue: communities of place, communities of interest, communities of space, communities of any type. The idea was, let's look for people within those specific communities who have an interest in this particular kind of situation, both for themselves and for other members of their community.

The other piece of interest to us at Cooperative Extension was this opportunity to lay the groundwork for a much larger effort in energy efficiency. In New York State there are lots of programs and money available for people to invest in energy efficiency for their home. If you're a low-income person in New York State, you can get about 70 percent of your investment costs subsidized through NYSERDA

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(the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority) and other related programs, but relatively few people are actually taking advantage of them. Last summer, our association did a survey on the use of these programs in collaboration with Cornell faculty member Bill Trochim, who does concept mapping, and one of his students. We surveyed 240 households in four low to moderate-income neighborhoods in Tompkins, Tioga and Broome counties. We were trying to understand the barriers that people face to adopting and taking advantage of these energy efficiency programs. What we found was that people were afraid and confused. People needed to trust the sources of information. They needed the ability to go back and talk to knowledgeable people more than just once, to help them think things through and come to a decision about whether to make that type of investment.

We looked at this situation and thought if we could put information about these low-cost, energy efficiency programs out in the newspapers and bulletins all over the place, a lot of people would make use of it. Those who did would benefit greatly. But we also had a couple of concerns. If all we did was put information out, we would have missed an opportunity for strengthening networks, and we would have blown an opportunity for laying the groundwork for a large scale, post-emer-

gency energy efficiency program. We figured, though, that we could design something to allow for interaction between people. We would build into it the ability for us to capture names, addresses, and levels of interest of people throughout the county. We thought we could capture levels of interest in energy efficiency as well as interest in helping people in their community. We thought we could address all three of those things at once: to save a bunch of money, trace and strengthen existing networks, and lay the groundwork for future energy efficiency.

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We designed a survey checklist for people of eighteen things they can do to save money on energy. For example, if you installed five special fluorescent lights in your home, you could save between \$30 and \$50 a year. We did that for eighteen different things. People could just run down the list. We also had call-ins set up so we could determine whether they were already doing it, wanted to do it, would be willing to do it, or needed some help doing it.

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We've gotten this information out in a number of different ways. We've got youth groups that have taken it and had contests among area youth to see how much money people could potentially save in their community. One youth's effort might average savings of \$300 per household or \$4500 across all the households visited. One of the youth groups was able to save around \$34,000. Another way we got the information out was at local fairs, local gatherings, and just talking to people. We had them fill out the checklist. We convinced them this would be a worthwhile thing to do. In all these situations, we had a place for them to indicate on the checklist whether they would be willing to share this information in some way, whether it was at church, at work, or with friends in their neighborhood. They could also check off where they would like to share the information. We did this with senior citizens groups and at the local level by identifying street captains. Street captains are basically volunteers who are known and trusted by the rest of the people on their street. They would be the ones to take the survey around door-to-door, share the information, collect the completed survey form, leave them a copy if they were interested, and then get those surveys back to us.

The Heating Solutions Group decided to try out this approach in Freeville, which is where I'm from, just to see if it would work. The mayor there is interested in building community. We also have another person in Freeville who does consulting work on community building. Either this woman or the mayor also knew a postal worker who was very interested in this kind of work.

So, last October, the four of us literally sat down one Saturday afternoon and designed the process from scratch. Through trial and error, in a little less than two weeks we had identified eighteen street captains and twelve volunteers. We did about 150 surveys in a very short period of time. Our aim in Freeville was to try the process out, learn from it, reflect on it, document it, and then to talk about it more broadly across the county to see if we could get other people interested in doing the same thing. There are five other places that are starting up the same thing in their neighborhoods. In Lansing, there is quite a large initiative that involves three different neighborhoods and four different churches. There's a mobile home park where this is being tried out, and we are continuing to work in Freeville. There's also an effort in Newfield and Caroline. So, again, our aim is to work with people who are interested in doing this locally, refine and learn from the process. Then the plan is to scale up the work to the county level next fall.

The Heating Solutions Group has been working at the county level. We've conceptualized, thought through, and refined everything that has been taking place for all three of the components of the program. All of this has been accomplished through the work of the people involved in the Heating Solutions Group. I came

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up with the process for the third component, which was then refined through input from the rest of the group. It turns out that there was a very similar program going on in St. Paul, Minnesota in 1984 and in Madison, Wisconsin in 1995, so this is nothing new. I happened to find that out because somebody from Tompkins County had participated in the St. Paul program. He brought some additional documentation, which we now have and are incorporating into our project.

We added a component for people who need additional help to do low cost, no cost things. In Freeville we're going back to work with people on what they need to have done. We're also incorporating this component into the work in the other five communities. We've pulled in some people from Cornell who do energy work, and local contractors interested in this process because they see it as a way of building a customer base. They're going to offer a technical training to volunteers in April, then those volunteers are going to go out and do this low cost, no cost work in these people's homes in these communities. By the beginning of May 2006, we hope to have completed this work in these five places. Then the people who have been involved in the process will meet to document what we've done and lay the groundwork for a larger scale effort in the fall.

We're also negotiating with county government, which sees our program as a way to cut costs for low-income families, resulting in less need for their services next winter. They also see this program as groundwork for larger scale energy efficiency with two big benefits for the county. First, for each household that has energy efficiency work done, it's got to spend somewhere about \$6,500 on average. There are about 15,000 households that need work done. If actual expenditures amount to 15,000 households multiplied by \$6,000 per household, that's \$90 million, a lot of money that could support a substantial number of jobs locally. Second, the savings on energy are as high as \$600–700 or more a year from these investments. That's a large amount of money, and that's in addition to the money to be saved from the low-cost, no-cost options we have been sharing through the survey. We have now completed about 1400 surveys, and the average savings is a little under \$300 per household, the low end of our range. If that average held throughout the county, you're talking about \$10 million a year in savings. By the way, we have done all the work on this program with minimal resources. We have relied on volunteers and current staff, and have only spent a few hundred dollars for copies.

There are several things that I think are interesting about this initiative. The implementation cost of the program shows that we can do things with fewer resources than we think, including our own resources and time. This project illustrates ways that we should be working on strategic networking, which is a key component of this work. In every community there already exist a lot of networks,

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and some people belong to more than one. If you tap into the right people you can begin to think in terms of what kinds of networks are there to work with. Through strategic networking, you can save time, get other people to do things that they want to do, and reduce the costs that you're going to have on community projects.

Second, if you know what your long-term goals are, then you can use emergencies, which come up all the time, to help you move towards those goals. Emergencies motivate people to act. It is the difference that gets people to work on a Saturday; it's like night and day. Because of last year's emergency, people were motivated. They wanted to work on the issue. They had to work on it; they felt the need. So they worked on it. It's not the same now. If you're not ready when those emergencies strike, those opportunities are there but they're fleeting. You need to be ready for them.

Another interesting thing is the importance of marketing, and of market and audience analysis. Basic marketing is critical to what we're trying to do. It's putting the message out to audiences, segmenting those audiences in a number of different ways and then thinking in terms of what these different segments need to hear in order to be able to act. We get the information out to them in that way.

Extension played an important role in this effort. The low cost, no cost things were based on work done by other people at Cooperative Extension, and in many cases, the work of NYSERDA. This was work that had been done by researchers who in some cases had connections with Extension. So the information was reliable, factual, tested and valid, not hearsay. Extension gave it more credence. The other thing about Extension is the idea of helping bring organizations or people together by facilitating processes. We help pull the resources together that exist locally to get something done. I didn't convene the group because there was no need for me to convene the group. Somebody else was convening the group. But by being involved in that group, I was able to encourage a much more systematic approach than if Extension hadn't been involved.

What does this project show us about Extension's mission? I think it shows us that while Extension is a useful place to turn for getting questions answered, it is or can be so much more. Two to three years ago, when we were faced with the budget

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cutbacks, I got literally hundreds of stories from staff. I was giving stories to “stories people” in the legislature, along with numbers for the “numbers people.” What was for me so incredible when I was reading those stories, was that the words people in the stories were using were essentially the same words that I had been hearing from participants in Central America when we were using disasters as a way to build community and local leadership. Words like, “I have more confidence now;” “I feel

**What does this project show us about Extension’s mission? I think it shows us that while Extension is a useful place to turn for getting questions answered, it is or can be so much more.**

like I can do something about this problem;” “I came here to get help on this problem, but I went away with so much more, with the ability to deal with the issues in my life;” and “I learned how to deal with issues.”

People talked about having a greater sense of control over their own lives. They had gained an ability to analyze a problem and deal with it on their own. They came here for an answer, but they left with so much more.

I heard that over and over and over again in these stories. In many ways, Extension is really about people taking control and setting their own priorities. Extension asks, “What are your priorities?”, and then puts it back in their court. It’s about people being able to identify the issues that they’re facing, and then using the resources they have to deal with those issues. It’s about helping them as they sort through the resources and the options they have, then helping them to identify the ones that make the most sense to them.

The Extension story is so rich and so exciting to those who understand how people change and grow. When I think about who we are reaching when we tell our story, the ones who understand it almost intuitively, once they’re shown it, are the teachers, psychologists, priests, ministers, and others who are working with people who struggle to make themselves better or make their situations better. The other thing that I think is so important with respect to Extension is that we have the ability to reach out to large numbers of people. When you start doing the numbers, that starts to multiply the kinds of things we do. There’s a value that grows tremendously just because of the numbers of people we reach and involve.