

County UW-Extension panel unsure on hosting farm show

By Alexa Zoellner azoellner@dailyunion.com | Posted: Tuesday, May 10, 2016 9:02 am

JEFFERSON — Jefferson County potentially could be hosting Wisconsin Farm Technology Days in 2019.

However, there are a myriad of things to consider before taking on the job, officials say.

The possibility of holding the event was a topic of discussion during the Jefferson County University of Wisconsin-Extension Education Committee's Monday meeting.

Committee members present included Jefferson County Supervisors Glen Borland, Lloyd Zastrow and Gregg Patrick; UW-Extension agents Sarah Torbert, LaVern Georgson, Steve Grabow and Kathy Eisenmann; Jefferson County Board of Supervisors Chairperson Jim Schroeder and County Administrator Ben Wehmeier.

"Farm Technology Days is a large, three-day show that's like an agriculture trade show," Georgson, the UW-Extension agriculture agent, said. "People can see exhibits of the latest technology, the developments of industry; there's industry displays, there's field demonstrations, there's educational activities that go on with it. It's been a longtime event in Wisconsin and moves from county to county, which makes it unique on the national scene."

Georgson explained that this highly-sought-after event, would draw about 40,000 people over the three days seeking to learn about the "newest and greatest activities" that are happening in agriculture.

"Counties that have hosted this in the past have said that there are community development activities within people learning to work together, developing new relationships, developing leadership capabilities, assuming responsibilities," he said. "There's some economic benefits that could be coming to the county as we're ramping up to the three-day event, because it takes about three years of preparation to execute the program."

Much of the committee's discussion focused on the uncertainty of the management model and the extent of the role UW-Extension would play in organizing the event in light of the agency's upcoming reorganization.

After losing \$3.6 million in state funding, Cooperative Extension, a division of University of Wisconsin-Extension that includes the 4-H and Youth Development program, was forced to begin developing a massive reorganization plan.

Cooperative Extension is one of four divisions that make up UW-Extension. Programs within the division include Agriculture and Natural Resources; Community, Natural Resources and Economic Development; Wisconsin Geological and Natural History Survey; 4-H and Youth Development; Family Living; and Leadership Development.

Dubbed “nEXT Generation,” the reorganization initiative incorporates cuts across three areas: \$1.2 million in county and tribal nation-based programs, \$1.7 million in campus and UW-Extension specialist investment and \$700,000 in administrative and educational program support (see related story in the April 13, 2016, edition of the Daily Union).

“With the changes coming to UW-Extension, we’re not sure how (management would be organized), because we would be the first county under the new model to conduct the Farm Technology Days,” Georgson elaborated following the conclusion of the meeting. “With the uncertainty about the relationship between UW-Extension and Wisconsin Farm Technology Days Inc., that relationship is likely to be changing. The roles of each of those entities is going to be changing and what that looks like and how it impacts the successful conducting of the show is part of the question(s) that we have.”

During the meeting, Georgson told committee members that, when the office initially was approached, its reaction was “no, this is not something at this time we should really even think about or consider.”

However, after further consideration, Georgson explained that it was decided that “fair justice” needed to be done to determine reasons either for or against it.

“There are some serious considerations that need to be weighing into it,” he said. “With the agent, essentially a lot of other things come to a stop or are minimized because of the focus and effort that has to go into 16-17 different committees. We need at least 550 acres. There’s well over 1,500 volunteers that have to be coordinated; the logistics of transportation, food, utilities, all those things have to be coordinated and executed.”

To help determine whether the event is something the county could take on at this time, a survey will be sent to county residents soon.

“Based on conversations that Steve and I had with our county administrator, Ben Wehmeier, we decided that we would proceed with doing an evaluation of the county,” Georgson said. “A card (is being sent out) that will come back. It says, ‘should we take this on?’ The second question is, ‘are you willing to commit time and energy on a committee (for this event) to be successful?’ and ‘would you be interested in being the host farm?’”

According to Georgson, Wisconsin Farm Technology Days Inc., the state program leader who chairs the Farm Technology Days committee and Matt Hanson, UW-Extension's southwest region director, are aware that the county is conducting a survey.

The survey is expected to go out this week, which will bring the committee almost to June 1 before the office and UW-Extension Committee are able to review the results.

"Under normal circumstances, they would have made this decision in April," Georgson explained. "We've told them we're not going to (make the decision) until we've done due process, so we've got some time. I think we'll know by the early or mid part of June depending on how fast the survey (comes back)."

Georgson and Wehmeier explained that the county is, simply put, "strongly being encouraged" to take on the event.

"As we understand it, they want to move the show back to the southern third of the state," Georgson said. "Based on the counties that have hosted it recently — because they don't usually bring it back in less than 30 years is their goal, 20 is the minimum — it goes from Walworth to Kewaunee up to Wood and then it comes back and, because there's probably 15 counties without ag agents right now and the other counties are all within that 20-30 year window, that's how Jefferson County was 'selected.'"

The last time Jefferson County hosted Wisconsin Farm Technology Days was 1984 and it still was called Farm Progressive Days. It took place in Grellton in the northern portion of the county.

While Jefferson County officials and Jefferson County UW-Extension employees are reluctant to take on hosting the event without serious deliberations and careful consideration, they do acknowledge that there are benefits that come with holding the event.

"There's economic development. Over the three years, there's probably \$900,000 or more that could come into the county," Georgson said. "The food tents, all that money stays in the county after the nonprofits ... so that's pretty substantial. There's usually funds left over that can be used. The Activity Center at the fairgrounds was constructed with that after the last time it was in Jefferson County way back in 1984."

Wehmeier agreed.

"It's (offers) good opportunities," the county administrator said. "From the economic development to the reinforcement of agriculture to that education prospect, it's great opportunities. But pressuring us to try and make a decision ... that's disappointing."