White Pine County Community Situational Analysis: Results and Implications

Seth Urbanowitz
Extension Educator/Assistant Professor

Introduction

White Pine County is located in east-central Nevada and has a total area of 8,897 square miles. The population was estimated to be 10,030 as of 2010 (United States Census Bureau, 2010). Of this population, 4,225 (42.4 percent) live in the county seat of Ely. Other communities include McGill, Lund, Preston, Baker, Ruth, Cherry Creek and the Shoshone Indian Reservation. White Pine County is characterized as a high-desert, semi-arid climate with a basin and range topography that is marked by a boom-bust mining economy. It is also marked by its natural resources and tourist attractions that draw people from around the world.

The landscape consists of primarily north-south mountain ranges, up to 13,065 feet at Mount Wheeler, separated by narrow valleys ranging from approximately 5,000 to 7,000 feet. The creation of many wilderness areas in 2006, a national park in 1986, and other natural areas have capitalized on the natural beauty of the area, attracting many outdoor recreation tourists. The large resident game herds also attract many from around the country.

Since the county’s establishment in 1869, mining has been the primary driver of the local economy. This is evident in the undulations of population over time, as well as real estate prices, personal property valuation and tax receipts. The need for economic diversification has been documented for decades. Economic diversification and the local economy were the primary reasons for dissatisfaction with the area in the late 70s and economic sustainability and stable employment were identified as major community-economic development themes in 2010 (Barone, Evans, Hallagan and Walker, 1978; Nevada Rural Development Council, 2010). Tourism has become an important part of the local economy and agriculture has historically been a stable economic driver.

Community Situational Analysis

In the winter of 2012/2013, the newly appointed Extension educator conducted a series of focus groups as part of a community situational analysis. A priority of the Cooperative Extension is to understand community needs and develop research and educational programming that addresses local needs. A community situational analysis is a tool used to guide county education programming prior to program development. It elucidates community needs, assets and opportunities that can be solved through educational programming and research (Singletary, 2004).

Educational and research program priorities were established using qualitative primary data generated from seven county focus groups.

Methodology

Focus groups were chosen as the primary means for data collection. This research facilitates a citizen-based Extension agenda for educational and research activities in White Pine County.

A focus group is a guided discussion on targeted issues (Lewis and Breazeale, 2004). It is a group interview that creates interaction and dynamism among a targeted group who explore ideas and understandings of the selected topics (Cameron, 2005).

Focus groups were chosen as the means of primary data collection due to numerous
surveys being conducted in the previous five years with no published results. Nonresponse due to survey fatigue caused by increased levels of surveying has been highlighted as a serious issue in research (Groves, et al., 2001). Focus groups also provide an opportunity to not only uncover and extract existing knowledge from community stakeholders but also to contribute to the development and construction of new understandings (Cameron, 2005).

One hundred fifty adult community stakeholders engaged in business, natural resources, agriculture, economic development, and education/youth development were invited to participate in one of four two-hour-long focus groups held at the University of Nevada Cooperative Extension Office in Ely. An invitation to participate was sent to those leaders engaged in the aforementioned sectors and a follow-up phone call with those indicating interest was done to create heterogeneous groups. Twenty-eight invitees chose to participate, of which, 23 eventually participated. Heterogeneity of participants was essential to obtain a broad range of perspectives on community needs, assets and opportunities. Fern (2001) asserts that heterogeneity increases the diversity and range of positions taken on the topics discussed. It has also been documented that heterogeneity is well suited for exploratory focus groups (Grover and Vriens, 2006). The four broad topics of agriculture/horticulture, natural resources, youth development, and community resource and economic development were chosen because of legislative mandate, finite resources and strengths of the Extension educator and office staff. Each topic was allotted approximately 25 minutes for discussion.

Three youth group interviews were held in three separate senior achievement classes of 29, 22 and 27 (N=78) high school seniors. Youth involvement in local decision-making cultivates skill enhancement, confidence and ownership that prepares youth to be civic minded as they prepare for adulthood (Brennan, Barnett, and Baugh, 2007). Moreover, Nitzberg (2005) contends that youth must be fully engaged and involved in change efforts at the community level if they are to become effective members of society. Allowing youth to provide input into program development was an effort to engender ownership, contribute to the community and have their contributions recognized as valued.

Analysis and Results

The sectors represented in the series of adult focus groups were grouped as agriculture (5 participants), natural resources (4 participants), community resource and economic development (4 participants), education/youth development (6 participants), and business (4 participants). A slight majority of participants were male (52 percent). Participant ages ranged from late twenties to late sixties. The majority resided in the city of Ely (70 percent). Other communities or areas within White Pine County represented were Lund (9 percent), McGill (9 percent), Cross Timbers (4 percent), north Spring Valley (4 percent) and Ely Shoshone Indian Reservation (4 percent).

Focused coding was used to analyze data associated with the first question related to what participants valued about their community. This was done to facilitate analysis of a wide range of topics. Open coding was used to analyze the data gleaned from each specific topic concerning opportunities and needs as well as assets. The topics were fairly narrow, thus facilitating the development of themes. Participants were asked to list three positive features of White Pine County, or what they valued most about the place in which they live. Themes for organization of positive feature data were chosen because of legislative mandate, finite resources and strengths of the Extension educator and office staff. Each topic was allotted approximately 25 minutes for discussion.

Each example of a positive feature given was grouped according to natural resource characteristics, community and social capital characteristics, economic characteristics or human and cultural characteristics. Adult participants focused largely on the community characteristics and social capital features (safe environment for kids, good schools, sense of community, quiet and friendly) and the natural
resource features (beautiful landscape, clean air, open space, outdoor recreation, summer weather). The positive human and cultural characteristics (ranching community, diversity and openness to new people, and western lifestyle) and economic features (tourist attractions and potential for growth) were mentioned last, respectively.

Youth participants focused overwhelmingly on the positive natural resource characteristics (outdoor recreation opportunities, clean air, wilderness and natural beauty), followed by community characteristics and social capital (safety in the community, good schools, quiet and friendly). They mentioned the economic characteristics (small businesses, mining and agriculture) and human and cultural characteristics (ranching culture) least often, respectively. These positive features represent assets or strengths that can be drawn upon in future community endeavors to improve the quality of life.

Youth participants had much more to say during the youth development topic than all other topics. Adult participants were the least vocal as a whole in discussing youth development. However, when asked what program they would allocate an extra dollar to, the overwhelming majority of youth and a majority of adult participants said they would spend the extra dollar on youth development. Though priorities were different among adult and youth focus groups, similar themes emerged.

Major themes that arose from asking participants to “identify the three to five concerns, needs and/or opportunities that will be most important over the next five years in White Pine County” according to youth and adult participants by topic were as follows:

Youth (from most discussed to least discussed):
Youth Development:
- Youth recreation and entertainment
  o Includes activities for youth (outdoor and indoor) and youth groups.
- Youth employment
  o Includes availability of jobs and development of job skills.
- Youth training, education and support
  o Includes environmental education, student support/encouragement, vocational courses, summer tutoring, college readiness and improvement of 4-H program.

Natural Resources:
- Water
  o Includes water exportation and availability and water quality.
- Landscape management and the environment
  o Includes wildlife decline, sustainability of natural resources, climate change and its impact on the landscape, wildfire and air pollution.
- Public lands
  o Includes access to natural resources (roads, hunting and fishing, firewood and grazing), proper management of public lands and wild horses.

Community Resource and Economic Development:
- Economic diversity
  o Includes reliance on mining, availability of stores (grocery and others) and sustainability of local economy.
- Capitalizing on place
  o Includes improved parks, pride in Ely, community beautification, outdoor tourism, tourism and outdoor recreation.
- Small business development and entrepreneurship
  o Includes entrepreneurship and supporting local businesses.

Agriculture:
- Local production and consumption
  o Includes food security, homegrown/locally grown food, better farmers’ market, healthy food in schools and community gardens.
- Agricultural diversity
  o Includes producing different crops, business opportunities for farmers, more farming opportunities and organic agriculture.
- Knowledge and awareness of agriculture
Includes knowledge about agriculture in the area and raising agricultural awareness.

**Adult** (from most discussed to least discussed):

**Agriculture**:
- **Agricultural diversity**
  - Includes alternative crop production, value-added products, jobs in agriculture, cooperatives, and over reliance on a few products.
- **Local production and consumption**
  - Includes better farmers’ market, local meats and produce, self-sufficiency and healthy foods.
- **Knowledge of agriculture and agricultural limitations**
  - Includes knowledge of agriculture in the area, inherent agricultural limitations, youth involvement in agriculture and knowledge of agriculture among the general public.

**Community Resource and Economic Development**
- **Captalizing on place**
  - Includes park and trail improvement, recreation based development, community beautification, downtown revitalization and marketing what we have to offer.
- **Small business development and entrepreneurship**
  - Includes entrepreneurship, support and mentorship for entrepreneurs, customer service and local business support.
- **Civic engagement, local leadership and local government**
  - Includes civic pride, volunteerism, improved local leadership and stewardship of net proceeds.

**Natural Resources**:
- **Public lands and resources**
  - Includes regulations on public lands (road closures, grazing, firewood, hunting and fishing), skewed public-private ownership, local management and wild horse/sage grouse issues.
- **Outdoor recreation**
  - Includes fully develop trails for recreational development, develop recreational tourism potential, develop eco-tourism market, education on recreational opportunities in county and capitalize on county natural history.
- **Water**
  - Includes water exportation and availability.

**Youth Development**:
- **Youth employment**
  - Includes youth entrepreneurship, youth employment, employability skills, summer employment and non-mine related jobs.
- **Youth training and education**
  - Includes vocational classes, renewable resource education, alternative programs (art and drafting) and science education.
- **Youth involvement in community**
  - Includes youth involvement in community development, youth clean-ups, youth leadership and involvement in real world issues.

Assets were identified by the groups to help understand local resources or strengths that could be leveraged to benefit the community. Diverse themes emerged from the asset identification portion of youth and adult groups.

Youth identified assets were frequently related to the natural resources of the county (resource extraction, natural beauty and outdoor activities), followed by youth assets (opportunities to be involved, safe and less violent community and outdoor lifestyle), economic assets (tourism, mining and community characteristics) and agriculture (livestock, hay and water). Adults identified assets more frequently related to natural resources (outdoor activity, natural beauty and water), followed by economic assets (place based, natural resource based, and community characteristics), youth (education/schools, community characteristics and human characteristics) and agriculture (water, livestock and range resources).

**Implications for Program Development**
Program development will have the goal of addressing identified needs and opportunities while building on assets through education and research initiatives. Finite resources, Extension educator and office staff areas of expertise and access to others with relevant expertise will help shape program development and implementation.

Based on the findings of this assessment, program areas will be prioritized as youth development is greater than agriculture; agriculture is equal to community resource and economic development; and natural resource programming is least important.

Youth Development

Among focus group participants, youth development was recognized as the most important program area to address. The primary youth themes that will guide programming are youth employment/work preparedness, youth training and education, youth recreation and youth involvement in the community.

The Extension educator and 4-H/youth development program coordinator will collaborate to design youth development programs that address the needs and concerns while capitalizing on youth assets. Youth entrepreneurship and employability skills, agricultural and natural resource education and community involvement would be important programs to develop.

Agriculture

Agriculture and community resource and economic development will be given equal weight as the second most important program areas.

Agricultural themes that arose were local production and consumption, increase agricultural diversity and increase agricultural awareness and understanding of limitations. Agricultural entrepreneurship, knowledge of agronomic limitations and opportunities and encouragement of locally driven market programs would be important to develop. Drawing upon the county’s agricultural assets would warrant programming or research in improved agronomic practices in hay production that increase yield, reduce costs and/or reduce water use. The Extension educator will work with producers to implement small plot research involving agronomic trials that may be of interest.

Community Resource and Economic Development

Community resource and economic development was an important concern of participants. It has remained an important topic due to problems with diversification and reliance on a few large employers and geographic isolation. The county would benefit from programs related to capitalizing on place, small business development and entrepreneurship, civic engagement, leadership and local government education.

Programs that address community improvement, recreation opportunities for tourists and residents, entrepreneurship and civic engagement would be the topics that would support community resource and economic development.

Natural Resources

Natural resources emerged as the fourth highest priority. It was also mentioned most by adults and youth as the county’s greatest asset. Natural resources are plentiful in a county sparsely populated. Moreover, the vast majority of the area within the county is federally owned, public lands. This often leads to competing uses and controversy. The themes that came from discussing the needs and opportunities related to natural resources were water exportation and quality, landscape management and the environment, outdoor recreation and public lands issues.

The county would benefit from program development related to watershed understanding and awareness, understanding of regulations and conflict management related to public lands, environmental/range education and education and coordination of outdoor recreation development opportunities.

Conclusion

A community situational analysis was conducted in White Pine County in the winter of
2012/2013. Primary data was collected using a series of seven focus groups, four with adults and three with high school seniors.

The results and analysis provide a framework to guide program development and implementation, as well as the allocation of office resources. The youth development program will be broadened with the help of the 4-H/youth development program coordinator as resources permit. The Extension educator will have primary responsibility for agriculture, community resource and economic development and natural resource programming, while complementing the development and implementation of youth development programs.

References


