Assessing County Extension Programs’ Readiness to Adopt Technology
Observations by Steve Dodrill, Lane County Staff Chair
July 24, 2009

Background
The Oregon State University Extension Service in Lane County provides some of the largest and most successful Extension programs in Oregon, including 4-H Youth Development, Master Gardeners, Master Food Preservers, Compost Specialists and Nutrition Education. It hosts a statewide food safety/food preservation hotline and delivers educational programming with the help of about 650 trained volunteers. Walk-in, telephone, and email contacts are among the highest in the state.

Lane County is located at the southern end of the Willamette Valley and stretches from the Pacific Ocean to the crest of the Cascade Mountains. It is the fourth most populous county (346,560 residents) and one of the more culturally diverse in the state. Eugene is Oregon’s second largest city with a 2008 population of 154,620 and is home to the University of Oregon, Lane Community College and Northwest Christian University. The principal industries of the county are agriculture, higher education, high technology, forest products, recreation, recreational vehicle manufacturing and tourism.

One year ago, Lane County commissioners approved their 2008-09 operating budget without $47 million in annual federal timber payments. This resulted in major cuts to many county-supported services, including the OSU Extension Service. The loss of $483,000 in local funding forced Extension to begin draining reserve funds. It reduced staffing by 25 percent, suspended two of five program areas and began a quest to find new local funding sources. OSU officials estimated the office would be able to operate for approximately one year, but with fee increases, fundraising and grants, it now appears the office will be able to operate through the end of the 2009-10 fiscal year.

Extension’s survival in Lane County has generated a success story, but it has come at a cost. Reduced capacity to deliver traditional educational programs has introduced a variety of challenges in workplace productivity, volunteer management, and internal and external communications. Volunteers are growing weary of fundraising and energy levels are declining.

Current Uses of Technology
OSU Extension Service employees use a variety of technologies in the execution of their daily jobs. Desktop computers and telephones are technologies commonly used inside the office, while laptops and cell phones are popular outside the office. The Polycom unit is useful for meetings with individuals on campus or in other county offices, saving both time and travel costs. A portable, wireless modem allows faculty and staff to establish Internet connectivity just about anywhere in the office. A limited number of individuals work to maintain the Lane County Web site, and several faculty and staff have experimented with online communication tools such as blogs, Facebook, and Twitter.
Current Barriers to the Use of Technology
A lack of time and adequate skills seem to be the greatest challenges to faculty and staff exploring, adopting, and using newer technologies. Staff reductions have increased workloads, leaving less time to learn and work with newer technologies. If faculty and staff can find the time for technology trainings, the eventual outcome is often disappointing. Either the trainings are not effective, or participants later forget what they learned due to infrequent use of the technology. Another challenge is that some staff members are either fearful or resistant to change. These individuals are comfortable with what is familiar to them and have little interest in acquiring new skill sets. Finally, a lack of awareness about technological advances often prevents individuals from improving productivity through technological solutions.

Goals for Technology Use in Lane County
• A primary goal is to enhance access, awareness and use of Extension’s most innovative programming, resources, and communications. This could be achieved through a content management system and Web 2.0 technologies that integrate and provide easy access to databases of local, statewide, national and international significance. Relevant news and multimedia, self-paced learning modules and live, online trainings could also enhance the effort.

• A second goal is to create employee workload efficiencies. Featuring popular content and frequently asked questions on the Extension Web site has excellent potential to reduce repetitive inquiries. Implementing online registration and payment systems could produce employee efficiencies of more than 50 percent.

• A third goal is to improve communication with both internal and external audiences. With so many communication technologies available today, opportunities to enhance communication with colleagues and clientele are everywhere.

• A fourth goal is to promote Extension’s online presence and expand online communities. There is incredible potential to engage new audiences through social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Extension ignores this at its own peril.
Lane County Staffing:

Administration
Steve Dodrill, Staff Chair
Robin White, Operations Manager

4-H Youth Development
Carolyn Ashton, Assistant Professor
Denise Ashley, Office Specialist II/IT Coordinator

Farms/Gardens
Ross Penhallegon, Associate Professor
Linda Renslow, Office Specialist II

Food Preservation/Food Safety/Extension Study Group
Susan Busler, Associate Professor
Donna Crosier, Food Safety Hotline Coordinator

Nutrition Education
Karren Cholewinski, Program Coordinator
Dana Baxter, Instructor
Noy Rathakette, Instructor
Nancy DeSpain, Nutrition Coordinator
Drew Arneson, Education Program Assistant
Liz Canizales, Education Program Assistant
Amy Donley, Education Program Assistant
Kelly Makinson, Education Program Assistant
Tammy White, Office Specialist II

Regional Extension Faculty Serving Lane County
Melissa Fery, Instructor, Small Farms, OSU Extension Service - Benton County
Shelby Filley, Associate Professor, Livestock & Forage, OSU Extension Service - Douglas County
Mark Mellbye, Professor Emeritus, Commercial Field Crops, OSU Extension Service - Linn County

July 2009