Ellen Burton, Regional Director welcomed everyone on to the conference call. John Gesell, Chairman called the meeting to order. Those attending were Leroy Neitzel - Champaign, Janet Hasten - Clark, Bill Harrington - Coles, Madeline Harris - Crawford, Larry Casey – Jasper-Cumberland, Josh St. Peters - McLean, Debbie Winder - Piatt, Marva Green – Richland-Lawrence, Brian Basting – State Advisory Council, and Karen Hawthorne – State Advisory Council. Everyone introduced themselves, told what county they represented and their affiliation with that county.

Secretary’s Report was approved.

The speaker for the evening was Marilyn Brengle, Assistant to the Director of Extension Field Operations. She discussed the federal, state, and county funding. The funding has been pretty consistent the last 8 to 10 years. It has only increased to $8.9 million this fiscal year. With the inflation and decrease in dollar power it has made significant differences on what we can do. We had been able to absorb the rising costs over time, but cannot do so anymore. The good news is that volunteers have done a good job with funding, county board matches, and local trust funds. Federal and state sources support the regional offices, salary, etc. Marilyn stated that it was decided that staff needed to be given information regarding the budget shortfall meetings were held in each region in March. It was stressed that new fiscal goals were needed for the organization so our financial situation can improve and we can move forward. As these meetings were taking place in March, Extension still believed that county board match money was still in place for FY08. Other items discussed included ways to diversify the revenue stream and not depend so much on county money. Marilyn thought as we move forward it was going to become more difficult each year to rely on the county board matching funds. Extension asked units to think of other ways of raising funds that would stay in the unit. Unit staff was asked to talk among themselves and their Councils to work toward a 10% goal as we work through fiscal year 2009.

On April 1, 2008 Extension was notified through the Illinois Department of Ag that there was no county board match dollars. Even though money had been allocated to Extension in the budget, there was going to be no money. Extension spent a lot of time trying to minimize the impact of what would happen if, in fact, they didn’t receive any county board match. County Directors were asked to take a look at their budgets and decide what the highest priorities were, and to draw-up plans based on an 85% and 0% county board match. There was a lot of anguish on everyone’s part on how to make such severe reductions. County Directors were asked to carefully think through the process of what may become a reality. Extension was then notified about the release of the county board match money. That has turned things around, at least many units that were going to be in the red at the end of the fiscal year, will now probably not be in that severe of a situation. As times do get tougher Extension will need to take a look at
some of the other strategies Extension can utilize to stay within budget and still supply people in the county with support.

From here forward with state funding it is going to be a struggle. Extension is constantly going to have to prove its worth to the people in the counties. It is going to be important to make people understand what Extension does. Extension plans to put forth the request again next year and hope to receive funding. It has helped everyone for identifying what is important to each unit, and the time everyone has taken to do that.

Unit Reports:

Aaron Steffen, Livingston County – The budget is main thing haunting everyone. Programs sponsored were Earth Day, food and ladies health service with teenagers, Butterfly Program - hatching to lifecycle-4th graders, and Embryology Program-3rd graders.

Janet Hasten, Clark County – Received a $4,500 grant from Regional Alliance for Youth for Leadership Education and Development program or LEAD. This program helps high school youth develop their leadership skills, better prepare them to enter the workforce, and teach them basic living skills. Clark County plans on expanding the program into two more high schools. Colors Program was also presented. “Your Future Begins Today” presented in collaboration with U of I Extension in Clark County, the Marshall School District and the City of Marshall to senior citizens and Marshall High School.

Piatt County – No report

Larry Casey, Jasper/Cumberland County - Don Frederick, County Director, says the unit is in good shape financially. Programs presented included Operation Safe Kid – 4th grade safety day – kitchen fire, home food prep, kids made safety kits. Welcome to the Real World Program and maintenance and repair information about automobiles.

John Gesell, Ford County – Program offerings include Ag Literacy Program with Farm Bureau for 4th graders, Spring Time Spouts – April and May 2008 which focused on basic plant needs of corn and soybeans. There were six classes that were brand new other than what were previously done.

Bill Harrington, Coles County – The Coles Unit has developed a new partnership with Eastern Illinois University, Academy of Lifetime Learning to provided low cost non-credit classes to mature people in the county. They offered five classes which were to be presented by five Extension personnel.

Josh St. Peters, McLean County – The Unit is assisting growers as farmers get busy planting. Master Gardeners have been busy and just returned from an out-of-state trip to Michigan. They are preparing to celebrate their anniversary. The Council has been busy working on program guidance. Also, Don Meyer is assisting as Interim County Director in the Livingston unit.
Marva Green, Lawrence/Richland County - 4-H had their 7th Annual Taste of 4-H on April 5. There were 50 4-H members and over 250 people attending. The unit has hired Leah Miller as a grant writer. Several 4-H groups were on a letter writing campaign and made calls to help get the county board match released. HCE has been struggling to get volunteers and programs going. HCE is going to have to get volunteers or disband the program. Five volunteers have come forward and are helping to revitalize the organization. Richland County had 217 students and 11 teachers participating in the 6-week 2008 Operation Safe Kids Program.

Madeline Harris, Crawford County – Council and Foundation Board meetings were held to discuss what future programs to keep and what the unit could afford. They looked ahead at “what ifs” and what could be cut in necessary. Debbie Tedford received a $10,000 grant from Marathon Oil to fund a bike safety program. The Unit also held a Conservation Day in conjunction with the SCWS office.

Leroy Neitzel, Champaign County – Darla Heath was hired as new County Director. The Moonwalk Program is in full swing. The City of Peoria challenged the Champaign County residents to participate with walking teams. Both counties have been doing a great job. The Welcome to the Real World program is being offered in area high schools, but a two-day program is also offered to Lincoln Challenge Academy for young adults. Most of these students have never had a check book, so just teaching them how to use a check book is amazing. The Master Gardner and Master Naturalist programs are going strong. The Unit has looked at what programs they would try to cut back on and what they would make across-the-board cuts to. Steve Ayers, Unit Educator, Farm Business Management and Marketing just came back from a trip to China. He was excited about what he learned and was passing the information along to others.

ESAC Review

Brian Basting – Talked about the 4-day trip to Washington D.C. where he attended the Public Issues Leadership Development Meeting. Extension has a lot of challenges ahead but has many volunteers and staff willing to accept the challenges. It is really important that the response Extension saw in the last 30 days emphasizes how important Extension is to everyone.

Karen Hawthorne – Found everyone at the meeting PILD meeting in Washington D.C. enthused and knowledgeable. She thought as Extension look at the budget challenges that Extension could count on Dr. Campion to see them through the process. Some ESAC members met with state officials in February in preparation for their travel to Washington D.C., Karen stressed the idea that Extension needs to position themselves so that they aren’t held hostage by the state and become less dependent on the state. Extension must remain fiscally responsible. Extension is very well received and Karen thought everyone should be proud of their efforts so far. ESAC had training sessions during that conference and received tons of information how things are done nationally. Extension must keep their name out there.
Ellen Burton and Kathy Reiser

Nigel Austin has worked with each County Director on their budgets. Each unit has tried to maintain and move the programs forward during this money crunch. Prior to that, the Regional Office was working with Educators to develop plans to raise the $5,200 each Educator must raise each fiscal year in support for their expenses. Ellen is in the process of conducting performance reviews based on U of I policy. The conferences have been very different this year as she has been talking with staff about their goals and concerns. Academic professional staff are asked to fill-out a self-evaluation form which asks them to list their professional competencies, program planning and delivery, their past accomplishments and future goals. Ellen thought it has been very interesting that the entire nation has been watching what has been happening in Illinois. People are concerned and people have been consumed with the budget crisis. Ellen, Kathy and Nigel met with County Directors in April and took a look at a numbers on different scenarios. They talked in terms of sharing office staff and some office mergers. Without funding, some offices will not be able to stand alone. Extension will need to look at what changes are needed in the short term and what changes are needed in the long term. It is gratifying to see that people are trying to take care of one another.

Ellen stated that it has been a very intense couple of months as we have worked with staff. It is very difficult to approach the idea of cutting programs. It is always a pleasure when you get to add programs but it is very difficult when we must cut something important. As Kathy mention we spent quite a bit of time in our region talking with County Directors and sending out notes to our regional staff to keep them up-to-date. The Regional Office wanted to make sure staff was kept informed as to what was being worked on.

We do have some outstanding staff throughout the entire state, but we are particularly proud of the staff in the East Central Region.

Ellen asked the Regional Advisory Council what Extension can do to improve. Ellen encourages the Council to express their thoughts or comments.

Leroy Neitzel thought that Extension needed to educate the communities better on what we are about and what we do. There are a lot of people that have no idea what Extension is and he thought we would get more support.

Janet Hasten was in agreement with Mr. Neitzel. She thought in a rural county like Clark there were a lot of people that acquaint Extension with farms. She thought Extension needed to let people know of the programs that are available to the general public. She also suggested that there are many different ways of presenting classes, for example, pod casting, etc. Extension must develop resources using some of these alternative programming alternatives.
Janet stated that Ellen had mentioned that Extension has been receiving support from the entire country. Janet wondered if this was a trend of what is going on through the entire country. She commented that all states watch and are really hoping and praying this is not a trend. Ellen stated that Illinois will learn and others will be watching to get a handle on it. Not every state is financed in the same way.

Karen Hawthorne stated that we need to look at merging, sharing, and perhaps cancelling programs, she thought Extension need to spend time looking at the revenue side of things. She thought people were doing a better job with grant writing. Extension needs to look at more of a fund raising side, or look to the other states to see how they are financed. Revenue as well as expenses needs to be looked at.

Technology needs to be brought up to date. How to reach people is important. The price of gas is also affecting people and so we need to find different ways of reaching people.

Larry Casey stated that technology advances are fantastic, but he would like to put one note of caution, don’t get so busy with technology advances that you bypass an audience that doesn’t have that technology. Balance is needed.

Technology is not always available in all areas.

Marva Green thought it would be a good idea to bounce around ideas about what other counties do. Communication is important, as well as doing it in the balance. She stated that the area that she lives in has just recently been able to access high speed internet. These are the things that we need to be conscious of.

The comment was made that we seem to run into walls when trying to get information out to people about what Extension can do for them, for example, won’t put in newspaper.

The Regional Advisory Council was asked to share with their local Council what was discussed and to ask them what can be done to improve the organization. Then share the comments with Ellen. Discussion can be a good way for Council’s to come up with some great ideas.

Ellen is retiring and will be leaving the office the end of June. Nigel and Kathy will be interim in this position. Ellen did not know how Dr. Campion will move on this position or his intent.

Respectfully submitted,

Debbie Winder