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**2013 Success Stories**

**Building the Capacity of Local Plan Commissioners-Plan Commissioner Network, 2013 update**

**Situation:** Comprehensive planning is completed in all towns, cities and villages in Winnebago County. Implementation and plan consistency are critical to ensuring that local plans are properly used to achieve their desired land use outcomes. Equipping Plan Commissions with the ability to use the Plans is critical to ensuring plan consistency. Since 2010, several town Plan Commissions have experienced significant turnover and have mostly new members. Other towns have been experiencing a high degree of longevity among their commissioners. This change indicates a continual need for educational support on a variety of topics, although it also signals a need to tailor capacity building approaches to meet the more advanced educational needs of the more tenured plan commissioners. Since the early 2000s, land use and sprawl concerns were a common concern, however with the slow down in the economy, and reduction in housing starts in the county, these concerns aren’t as apparent as in past years. Of greater concern, given the fact that Winnebago County undertook a comprehensive revision of its general zoning code, is whether towns will opt in or out of county zoning. This situation brings with it a range of technical and educational needs for town boards and town plan commissioners as they grapple with this decision. The ongoing need to continue to build the capacity of Plan commissioners to work effectively and make informed decisions based on their Comprehensive Plan coupled with the educational needs around opting in or out of county zoning, drove the educational focus of the Winnebago County Plan Commissioner Network in 2013. Given the range of experience of plan commissioners in the county and continued requests for information and assistance, the need to build their capacity and skills still exists.

**Response:** Throughout 2013, Catherine Neiwender, Winnebago County UWEX Educator, continued the development and implementation of portions of the overall Plan Commissioner Capacity Building education program started in 2005. The Plan Commissioner Network completed its eighth year in 2013. The Network was designed after the principles of Peer Learning, essentially providing a forum for Plan Commissioners to identify their own immediate learning needs and focus on locally-relevant questions.

For 2013, participants selected the topics of demographics, recycling and solid waste, road use and IoH, and managing subdivisions as their desired discussion topics. For each Network meeting, Neiwender facilitated the discussion using Focused Discussion techniques and brought relevant content material to the meeting for discussion.

**Results:** Participation in the Plan Commissioner Network remains strong after eight years. Commissioners are engaged in the learning and conversation, and regularly share their own experiences and expertise with other participants. In this way, they are taking part in their own continuing education, which is critical to the success of these primarily volunteer positions. A total of four (4) Plan Commissioner Network meetings were held in 2013. A total of about 73 people attended, many of whom attended
multiple meetings, with all 16 Towns represented. Participants have identified key learning topics and tour ideas for the 2014 meetings.

**Evidence:** Qualitative evidence, including quality of sharing, discussion and attendance, shows that the Network is functioning as a peer-learning opportunity for Plan commissioners in the county. In 2013, Neiswender worked with Jessica Beckendorf (job share) to develop and implement a significant long-term evaluation project of the Plan Commissioner Network. Beckendorf took the lead in developing the research focus, survey protocol and implementation of the survey. A bulk of the survey work was completed in 2013, but results won’t be ready until early 2014. These data will inform potential changes to the Network and will allow documentation of impacts of this long-term program.