



Speaking to the Future:

A Guide to Promoting
the Futures Forum

Tools for Promoting the Texas Community Futures Forum

“Speaking to the Future: A Guide to Promoting the Futures Forum”

includes sample invitation letters for individuals and groups (in English and Spanish) and sample media releases. Also available online at <http://futuresforum.tamu.edu>.

“Speaking to the Future” video

distributed to each county at regional training events. Also available from the Educational Resource Library.

MKT-3255, “Speaking to the Future” brochure

introduction to the Texas Community Futures Forum process, especially for partners and other agencies and organizations.

Available in December 2003 from the Faculty Resource Center of the Extension Bookstore (<http://tcebookstore.org>), or online at <http://futuresforum.tamu.edu>.

MKT-3315, “Identifying Community Needs” fact sheet

overview of the Texas Community Futures Forum, especially the County Forum, written for the individual participant.

Available in December 2003 from the Faculty Resource Center of the Extension Bookstore (<http://tcebookstore.org>), or online at <http://futuresforum.tamu.edu>.

MKT-3346, “How to Write a Goal” fact sheet

an optional resource available to assist participants in writing their issue or goal statements with completeness and clarity.

Available in December 2003 from the Faculty Resource Center of the Extension Bookstore (<http://tcebookstore.org>), or online at <http://futuresforum.tamu.edu>.

Please continue to check the Futures Forum web site for additional resources. More will be coming!

Prepared by Elizabeth Gregory, Extension Communications Specialist.
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Targeted and Personal Marketing

If You Promote It, They Will Come

Your most important goal in promoting the Texas Community Futures Forum is getting the right people to participate. The strength of the Futures Forum depends on having diverse representation from each county. Your County Forum should include people from the various communities in the county, different organizations, clients of other agencies, different racial and ethnic groups, and both women and men. In the County Forum, the emphasis is on the end user of services, the “average consumer,” not necessarily the leadership of the county or community.

Invite enough people to adequately represent the local residents in identifying the needs and concerns in the county. Invite enough people so that 30 to 50 people actually participate in the County Forum.

Select people who:

- ◆ are the end users of services provided by educational, health, religious, governmental, business, social service, and other organizations in the county or community.
- ◆ represent a spectrum of the county or community that may be currently under-represented in Extension programs.
- ◆ represent diversity in gender, racial and ethnic groups, and geographic regions of the county.

Plan to:

- ◆ use a mix of personal, targeted contact methods as well as mass media to get the word out.
- ◆ contact other organizations and key leaders to locate people among their membership or clients.
- ◆ make presentations at meetings of clubs and organizations to extend an in-person invitation to their members.
- ◆ make multiple contacts with the individuals you really need to attend. Follow up your initial invitation with phone calls, post cards, or second letters.

Are They Waiting for an Invitation?

If you know people who would be great participants in the County Forum, don't just assume they know they're invited. For those you know and those recommended to you by other groups, a personal invitation is essential.

First, decide who should extend the invitation. The letter might come from the county judge, the mayor, the executive board chair, or another individual. The more prominent the individual, the more flattering and motivating the invitation can be. Sample invitation letters can be found

Goal One:

Getting the right people to participate.

They won't know they're invited if you don't ask.

They won't know how important they are to this effort if you don't tell them.

starting on page 6 and, in downloadable form, on the Futures Forum web site (<http://futuresforum.tamu.edu>).

When contacting participants, include:

- ◆ the invitation letter
- ◆ the brochure entitled “Speaking to the Future”

The invitation letter asks people to RSVP. If they don’t respond within two weeks, send a follow-up letter or make a telephone call to repeat the invitation.

A few days before the event, make a personal contact with all the people who have said they will attend, just to confirm that they’ll be there.

If you don’t end up with 30 to 50 people on your confirmed list, go back and contact anyone on your invitation list who has not yet responded.

But What About . . . ?

Can we invite Extension committee members or current Extension customers?

Yes, but . . . we also have a responsibility to involve people who are not familiar with Extension. By reaching out to everyone, you reduce the chance of overlooking needs that are specific to different groups of residents.

At the same time, it’s important to include Extension clients in the County Forum process, too. Just like other residents, they have needs and concerns regarding the future of their community.

How do I reach a wider audience to attend the County Forum?

The key is networking and targeting. Because you are asking people to actually participate in something, to give their time and their ideas, you need more targeted communication efforts than just the local newspaper. Using networks that already exist is an effective way to target the specific individuals you need.

Think about the different groups of people who live in your county.

Now think about how to reach each group. What clubs or organizations do they belong to? What agencies serve them? What churches or schools do they attend? Who is a gatekeeper who can give you access to these people?

Get in touch with your existing contacts in other organizations or talk with the leadership of other agencies and ask them to suggest people who are the end users of their programs and services.

Also, contact agencies and organizations in the community that you don’t normally work with, like the League of Women Voters, LULAC, the Junior League, NAACP, or B’nai B’rith, depending on the makeup of your community. Ask them to include information on the County Forum in their next newsletter or to send a specific letter to their members ask-

ing them to participate. Even better, they might also recommend individuals and give you their contact information. If so, mention the group's recommendation when you contact each person.

Again, because we're asking for participation, not just awareness, **more than one contact will be needed to ensure success**. Write letters directly to the individuals you select, but also follow up by post card and/or telephone call. And, of course, use whatever media outlets are available to you to place public invitations.

Can I conduct a County Forum with a specific group I'm already working with, like the Child Care Network in the county?

No. You will be able to use the nominal group process technique to facilitate any group, but **not** as part of the County Forum. The diversity of the Futures Forum process must be protected. An existing group that is already working together on a single issue is likely to skew the forum results, so that they won't be as representative of the diversity of concerns in the county.

However, once the County Forum has been conducted and the issues emerge, a special interest group may be able to participate in later phases of the process.

What about the online Forum? Are we responsible for promoting it in the county, and will it cut into our participation for the in-person County Forum?

You are not responsible for promoting the online Forum in your county. That promotion will be handled from the state level.

If you wish to mention it in any of your local promotional efforts, do so in the post-Forum media release. You can suggest it as an option for people who couldn't attend the actual meeting but still want to participate. This way, it should not reduce your in-person participation for the "real thing."

It's special to be recommended for something. Tell the people you contact who recommended them and why.

Mention the online Forum only in **post-Forum** communications.

Individual Invitation Letter

Dear _____:

You are one of only 50 people in _____ County invited to participate in the Texas Community Futures Forum 2004! Our County Forum will be one of a series held in every county in the state. The Texas Community Futures Forum is sponsored by Texas Cooperative Extension, an agency of The Texas A&M University System.

The goal of the County Forum is to hear your views about the future of our county. The outcome will be a prioritized list of actions that you and your fellow residents believe could help to make things better for yourselves, your families, your businesses, and our community.

The _____ County Forum will be held (date), at (location) in (town). The forum will begin at (time) and last approximately 2.5 to 3 hours.

Your ideas are important, and we hope you will be able to participate. Please call (name) at (phone number) if you are able to attend, to help us plan for facilities and supplies.

Speak to the future! Let your voice be heard in the Texas Community Futures Forum!

Yours sincerely,

Individual Invitation Letter—Spanish

Estimado/a _____,

¡Usted es uno/a de las 50 personas del condado _____ invitado a participar en el “Texas Community Futures Forum” local! El foro en nuestro condado será uno de una serie de juntas que se llevarán a cabo en cada condado del estado. El “Texas Community Futures Forum” es patrocinado por la Extensión Cooperativa de Texas, parte del Sistema Universitario Texas A&M.

La meta del foro es escuchar sus opiniones acerca del futuro de nuestro condado. En el foro se producirá una lista de acciones que usted y otros miembros de la comunidad piensan que podrían mejorar las cosas para su familia, su negocio o su comunidad.

El foro del condado de _____ se llevará a cabo el día (date) en (location) en (town). Este foro empezará a las (time) y durará aproximadamente entre 2.5 y 3 horas.

Sus ideas son importantes, y esperamos su participación. Por favor, llame a (name) al (telephone number) si puede asistir. Necesitamos una lista precisa de asistentes para preparar el local y tener suficientes materiales.

Atentamente,

Invitation Letter to Agencies and Organizations

Dear _____:

On (date), Texas Cooperative Extension in (name of county) County is hosting Texas Community Futures Forum 2004, a “town hall” event where local residents can voice their ideas and identify issues facing the community.

We invite you to partner with us in this effort by representing (name of organization or agency) at our County Forum. It will be held from (start and end times) on (date) at (place) in (town). If you cannot participate, please ask one or more of your (members or staff members) to represent your organization.

The different views of people from a wide variety of public and private agencies and organizations are vitally important to fully represent our community. We hope you will ensure that (organization or agency name) has a voice in this process.

Our Extension Advisory Committee in (name of county) County will use the issues identified at the forum as a basis for planning educational programs over the next several years. We believe you will find this citizen input equally valuable in assessing community needs and interests related to (“your organization” or brief organization name)’s plans for the future.

Through forums to be held in every county in the state, Texas Cooperative Extension hopes to hear the diverse voices of more than 12,000 Texans. The information from County Forums, including ours in (name of county) County will be aggregated for regional and statewide planning.

We look forward to seeing you or other representatives of your organization on (date). (State if lunch/dinner and free parking will be provided.) Please RSVP to (name) at (telephone number) so we will know how many people will attend from your group. We would appreciate your response by (date).

Sincerely,

Invitation Letter to Agencies and Organizations— Spanish

Estimado (a) _____:

Un principio común entre muchas de las agencias, instituciones y organizaciones en el condado _____ es el servicio a la gente. Todos contribuimos a esta misión común de diversas formas—proveyendo educación, protección y seguridad, o servicios de salud; construyendo recursos financieros; protegiendo nuestros valiosos recursos naturales. Para nosotros es muy importante enfocarnos en las necesidades de las personas de nuestra área, escuchando y respondiendo de maneras que mejoren sus vidas y el lugar donde viven. Esto es indispensable para la salud y bienestar económico de las personas, las familias y las instituciones en nuestra comunidad.

El folleto adjunto anuncia el foro “Texas Community Futures Forum 2004”. La Extensión Cooperativa de Texas ha organizado esta serie de eventos para escuchar e involucrar a las personas en identificar las necesidades más importantes de sus comunidades. A través de foros en cada condado del estado, Extensión espera escuchar a más de 12.000 tejanos.

La participación en los foros y el uso de sus resultados presentan una gran oportunidad para la colaboración entre agencias e instituciones en su programación para el beneficio de la gente. Cada agencia e institución aporta un conocimiento y unas habilidades únicas que ayudarán a construir el futuro de nuestro condado.

Para lanzar este esfuerzo, estaremos realizando el foro del condado _____ el (día) a las (hora) en (lugar). Esperamos la participación en el foro de representantes de su agencia o institución.

Deseamos sinceramente que usted y/o sus representantes puedan hallar tiempo para ver la participación de los ciudadanos en el foro del condado.

Por favor llame al (nombre) en (número de teléfono) si piensa asistir, de manera que podamos planear este importante evento.

Sinceramente,

Working with the Media

But Is It News?

Announce the County Forum in all the media outlets available to you. If you have a regular or occasional news column or a radio or television spot, be sure to invite the public to the County Forum. Also, send a media release to your local news outlets, and submit the information for the community calendar, too. In large cities, don't forget about neighborhood newspapers! Use as many different approaches as you can to encourage the public to attend.

Participation and/or endorsement of the Forum by the county judge, the mayor, or another local leader can add to the media appeal. If you are able to secure this kind of endorsement, be sure to mention it in your pre-Forum publicity and your media advisory. You can also customize your pre- and post-Forum media releases with a quote from that community leader.

Keep your district communications specialist "plugged in" to the process in your county. They can be a great resource for supporting your media work, including referring media requests to you, advising you on specific media relations tactics, and more.

Before the County Forum

Two weeks before the scheduled County Forum, invite media representatives to attend and observe. Prepare and deliver a media advisory to newspaper, radio, and/or television representatives. Include the following information about the County Forum:

- ◆ a personal invitation to attend and observe
- ◆ the purpose of the County Forum and background on the process
- ◆ who will participate (diverse groups of county residents)
- ◆ a request for advance publicity on the Forum

Follow up with a personal contact to answer any questions and to find out whether or not they plan to attend.

After the County Forum

After the County Forum, work with the local media to keep the public informed about the process.

- ◆ The day after the Forum, write a follow-up news release highlighting the results and send it to media representatives who did not attend.
- ◆ Send thank you letters for any news coverage you received.
- ◆ Keep the media informed about progress in addressing local issues.

Three possible goals for media work:

- ◆ pre-Forum publicity
- ◆ actual coverage of the Forum as it happens
- ◆ post-Forum reporting of results and progress

But what about . . . ?

Should we extend an open invitation to the public to attend the County Forum?

Yes. The purpose of the County Forum is to identify the needs and concerns of the community at large. People in the county should feel that the process is open and inclusive.

However, you cannot rely only on announcements in the mass media to bring in all the participants you need. You must combine media releases with targeted communication, especially direct mail, to ensure you get the numbers and the diversity needed for a strong Forum.

Sample Media Release or Column or Newsletter Copy

Residents Invited to Forum on Community Issues

What does our community need? What could be improved? What would make life better for everyone who lives here?

All local residents who are interested in a better future for themselves, their families and our community are invited to participate in the Texas Community Futures Forum at (time and date) at (location), said _____, county Extension agent.

The Forum is being conducted in every county as a statewide effort of Texas Cooperative Extension, an agency of The Texas A&M University System, to bring together a diverse group of individuals, groups and organizations to identify issues and concerns.

“We want to get broad-based input into this process so that a plan can be developed for the future of each county and for Texas as a whole,” said Dr. Chester Fehlis of College Station, Extension director. “We also want other local, state and federal agencies and organizations to participate. Many of the needs and concerns of people can best be addressed through cooperation and partnerships among the agencies and organizations that serve them.”

The Futures Forum process will help Extension develop its long-range plan for the next four years, 2005 through 2008, Fehlis said. However, he emphasized that the true goal is to facilitate the identification of common needs and define a process for addressing these needs to create a better economic, environmental and social situation in communities across the state.

“We view this as a partnership effort, all of us working together for the future of Texas,” Fehlis said.

“We encourage everyone to let their voices be heard in the _____ County Forum on (date),” said (agent’s last name). “This is your opportunity to speak to the future!”

Sample Media Release

EXTENSION'S FUTURES FORUM WILL HELP TEXANS SPEAK TO THE FUTURE

Writer: *Tim W. McAlavy, (806) 746-4051, t-mcalavy@tamu.edu*

Contact: *County Extension agent contact information*

If you write your own press release, consider asking someone to review it. Your district's communications specialist would be a good person to ask.

Are Texans ready to meet the challenge of change? Will their individual and collective efforts to answer local needs result in healthy, sustainable and prosperous communities?

The answer is "yes"—with the right amount of cooperative, proactive planning. That's the goal of this year's Texas Community Futures Forum, a statewide project of Texas Cooperative Extension.

"The Futures Forum will bring local residents, government, business and other groups together in a 'town-hall' type atmosphere to identify local needs, issues and problems," said Jett Major, district Extension administrator in Lubbock. "It is a unique opportunity for individuals and groups to join hands to improve their communities and the state as a whole."

This process is not new to Texas Cooperative Extension, an agency of The Texas A&M University System.

"The first Futures Forum was held in 1999, but we've brought local residents into our long-range planning efforts since 1985," said Dr. Chester Fehlis of College Station, Extension director. "Throughout our history, input from local people has helped us to determine how Extension can best serve the educational needs of the community. The Futures Forum process has brought greater diversity and new partnerships and cooperation into our planning."

"Extension agents and other trained facilitators will conduct the statewide County Forums this spring in all 254 Texas counties," Fehlis added.

The County Forums will generate a priority list of community-wide issues and needs. Each community's list will be posted on the Internet for county government, state agencies and other organizations to review and use when formulating their strategic plans. The statewide list of priority needs and issues also will serve as an important part of Extension's long-range outreach education plan for 2005-2008.

"The results from the Texas Community Futures Forum will help us and our partners to focus our activities on solutions," Fehlis said. "The Futures Forum will facilitate individual, joint and coordinated action to deliver results that will truly make a difference in the lives of Texans."

More information about the Texas Community Futures Forum is available on the Internet at <http://futuresforum.tamu.edu>.