

## Written results of the North Dakota Rural Grocers' Meeting - January 14, 2016

### *Brief History*

Over the past few years, the rural development department of the North Dakota Association of Rural Electric Cooperatives (NDAREC) and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development had been receiving an alarming amount of phone calls from rural grocery stores asking for help; loan and grant money for operating costs, equipment repairs, etc. Stores had been closing which prompted the question: Has there been a shift in the rural grocery store industry?

This project started at square one, simply put there isn't a contact list available for rural grocery stores in North Dakota. Staff from the NDAREC used a map to locate towns with 2,500 residents or fewer and did internet searches to find out if those particular towns had a store. From there, we compiled a list of 134 stores. We followed up with cold calls to inform grocers of the effort and to ask for their email addresses. After successful contact was made and an affirmative response to be surveyed, we chose four stores within close proximity to Mandan and invited them to a round table discussion of commonalities, ideas, information sharing, and next steps.

From June 2014 to January 2015 the survey was created and deployed. One hundred eighteen (118) of the 134 stores identified received surveys. A few of the stores indicated they were not interested and seven (7) had closed. The survey instruments were personally delivered by NDAREC and NDSU extension staff to build credibility and trust in the project. We merely introduced ourselves and the project and left the instrument with the store manager for completion at a later date. Out of 118 stores surveyed, 53 responded (45% return rate). The survey revealed that affordability and availability of product, people shopping out of town, competition from other stores, and availability of labor were the main challenges.

The four stores that were invited to the initial round table discussion eventually became part of the steering committee, which met on a regular basis to formulate the plan to go forward.

### *Preparing for the January 14, 2016 Meeting*

With the **Rural Economic Area Partnership Investment Fund, Inc.** as the fiscal agent, a successful grant application was received from the Consensus Council for \$10,000 for the Grocer's event.

Work began to prepare for the meeting. The steering committee determined how the day would be structured. The content of the meeting revolved around the survey findings.

The following steps were taken to inform the rural grocers about the meeting and to create energy and credibility for the effort:

1. One month prior to the meeting, we mailed out a save-the-date invitation including a cover letter describing the project, and registration form.
2. North Dakota Farm Credit Services agreed to provide meeting space at no cost.
3. We engaged David Procter from Kansas State University. Procter is Director of Center for Engagement and Community Development. He has worked on issues of school consolidation, community strategic planning, heritage museum education, facilitation of community dialogue, and strategies for re-populating rural communities. Procter served on the Advisory Board for the Kansas Center for Rural Initiatives. His role was to inform the rural grocers about the Kansas Rural Grocers Initiative and their success in networking and providing education for rural grocers. (David's PowerPoint Presentation is included with this report.)
4. We engaged Neil Doty, owner of N.C. Doty and Associates consulting company, to conduct preliminary research on the rural grocery distribution system in North Dakota; to identify opportunities for efficiency; and to present his findings at the meeting. (Neil's PowerPoint Presentation is included with this report.)
5. We distributed a press release about the project and meeting to the Bismarck Tribune and all weekly papers through the state.
6. We published an article about the project in the North Dakota Living magazine.
7. We added North Dakota legislators, the director of the ND Grocers Association, and local development professionals to our mailing list and invited them to the meeting.
8. We developed a meeting packet that included printed survey results, copies of the presenters' PowerPoints, and a notebook. NDAREC's graphic team provided a customized logo for the meeting at no cost. (A copy is included with this report)
9. For networking ease, we prepared name tags for the attendees.
10. There was a sign-in sheet at the registration desk to gather accurate contact information moving forward.
11. We created a sign-up sheet that was distributed at the meeting to gauge interest in networking opportunities.

As registration forms came in, we coordinated with the steering committee about the meeting's structure and held one pre-planning meeting. We also held a "dry run" the day before the meeting. During the "dry run" meeting we heard the preliminary results from the distribution research and discussed logistics of the registration table, break-out sessions, lunch, and technology.

To gather additional data during the meeting, we borrowed e-voting devices from USDA and the North Dakota State University Extension Service and integrated questions within the PowerPoint presentation that highlighted the survey results. Each attendee was given a voting device and when a specified slide was shown, they were able to place their vote, giving us a real-time result.

### *What Took Place at the Meeting*

The day was structured to move along fairly quickly, we wanted to hold the meeting within a time frame that allowed most people to travel to Mandan and back in the same day. (A copy of the agenda is included with this report.) Approximately 40 people attended the meeting (down from the 60 registered due to stormy weather).

As mentioned earlier, the meeting was structured to address the findings from the survey. During the meeting:

- The survey findings were presented by a rural grocery store manager from Hazelton.
- Dr. David Procter addressed ways that Kansas State has been successful in developing networking, marketing and educational opportunities for rural grocery store managers and their boards.
- Neil Doty addressed the challenges of minimum purchasing requirements, availability and affordability of supply, and distribution challenges.
- Ryan Taylor, USDA Rural Development State Director, provided encouragement to the rural grocers and discussed funding opportunities for energy efficiency updates.
- Four breakout sessions were held to give the grocers and opportunities to share challenges and successes regarding networking, marketing, labor issues and supply. Our steering committee documented the highlights from the conversations.

During the meeting, the steering committee gathered the attendee's ideas and came up with four items to work on as our next steps:

- 1) Develop easy access to updates and regulations
- 2) Aggregate rural grocer data/research (i.e. North Central Regional Center for Rural Development grant - examines travel patterns and norms in rural communities)
- 3) Developing network opportunities (i.e. Listserv/Facebook page/Moodle.com; tour bus for Rural Grocer Initiative, Wichita KS June 6-7; webinar based education)
- 4) Marketing

## *Next Steps*

After the January meeting, we tallied the evaluations and comments and sent a report to the committee, which included two new steering committee members. We held a follow up meeting on February 12, 2016 and devised a ‘going forward’ plan based on the ideas that emerged from the January meeting. Our follow up action steps will include:

- Press release to inform the media of our actions moving forward.
- Building an identity – we have named our effort the “North Dakota Rural Grocers Initiative”
- Network with other entities to develop a web presence where we can inform people of the initiative and post documents related to the effort.
- Develop quarterly media information pertaining to the initiative.
- Prepare a quarterly newsletter for rural grocers that provides information on best practices, events, marketing success stories and changing regulations.
- Work with the North Dakota Grocers Association and NDSU Extension to develop an all-encompassing data base of grocery stores in North Dakota.
- Develop a ‘buy local’ campaign, starting with: research to find existing information and campaigns; work to identify economic impact; identify grant opportunities; and begin developing a framework for the campaign.
- Aggregate data, such as vendor, volume and frequency of delivery information, from all stores. Coordinate the data collection survey with other states.
- Organize a bus tour for grocers to attend the National Rural Grocers Convention in Kansas in June 2016.
- Work with the North Dakota Grocers Association to develop educational based webinars for rural grocery store managers.

Working committees were formed to address each of the items above. NDAREC, USDA, North Dakota Farmers Union and the NDSU Extension Service continue to be involved and provide support for the project. Our actions continue to gain attention across the state. We received excellent coverage from the Bismarck Tribune. In addition, National Public Radio is developing a five minute segment regarding the challenges rural grocers’ face which will be aired nationally.

On behalf of the rural grocers, we sincerely thank you for your financial support of this meeting. The funding made it possible to hold the event at no cost to the rural grocers. It also helped us develop the tools we needed to bring credibility to the effort and to market properly.