

Charting our course for the future

The Stephenson County Farm Bureau Board of Directors met recently for a five-hour strategic planning retreat to analyze the current status of our organization and identify our future direction and priorities. It had been many years since this process had occurred and many of our newer board members had not had the experience at all, but the focus and engagement from everyone involved was outstanding. Program coordinator Steve Gannaway from Illinois Farm Bureau's Training & Development Division did a great job of leading the three work groups through the process of identifying strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities for SCFB. When the process concluded, the board identified a number of key areas of emphasis and programming that we plan to target, and we'll incorporate review and discussion of these items into our regular board meetings. Education, advocacy, and community engagement were common themes throughout the process. The board even updated our mission statement to a more succinct and quotable message – "To educate and advocate for agriculture." I'm truly appreciative once again of the quality leadership on this board, and I look forward to moving forward with this new vision and commitment.

Congratulations for creativity

Each year the Stephenson County Soil & Water Conservation District holds a poster contest for area students in grades K-6, with over 570 posters submitted this year for judging. Three winners are selected locally in K-1st, 2nd-3rd grade, and 4th-6th grade for consideration in the state contest, and this year two local winners were also state winners: Dominick Alber (Tri-County Christian) and Alayna Palmer (Pearl City). Both posters were sent on to the national competition, where Dominick claimed first place in the K-1st grade division at the National Association of Conservation Districts annual meeting. Dominick wins \$100 from the NACD Auxiliary, and he will be recognized at the local SWCD awards program here at the Farm Bureau on March 1 at 6:30 p.m.

Gaining a better understanding

The challenges of public perception of agriculture, pressures from outside interests, and creating harmony within our ranks continue to be front-burner issues for those of us in the world of agriculture. Freelance farm journalist Joanie Stiers, who's involved in a family farming operation in my home county of Knox County IL, made some excellent observations in her latest "At The Farm Gate" column. Joanie writes, "What's an industrial farm? That phrase isn't part of farm vocabulary, but rather seems a term coined to negatively label modern-day agriculture. I get this feeling that people who don't understand farms and farmers are trying to figure us out, which I applaud. Yet placement in a category with an associated stereotype only muddies that understanding like a gravel road in the thaw of March. You don't want to go there. Here's my take - farmers, generally, are the same at heart, no matter their farm's size, use of technology, or choices in pest control, crops grown or livestock raised. For a long time I have thought farming was like parenthood. Farmers parent the land until someone else becomes the caretaker. Most people can relate to that. Moms generally can relate to other moms, even if they have different lifestyles, approaches to child care or viewpoints on education. Farmers can have different styles, too, often reflected in their production practices. But at sunset, most all enjoy relaxation after a hard day and share core values: concern about land, resources, livestock, crops, their families and the future of their farm. Whether they're in the business of farm-fresh eggs or field corn doesn't matter in my experience. Farmers are about as proud and passionate as humans come."

Well put, Joanie – let's all cooperate to share a positive message about agriculture in general!

Deere/Kinze trip full

We've started a waiting list for our March 27 Deere/Kinze bus trip, and we're quickly nearing capacity on the Barn II Dinner Theatre (April 15), Cubs/Brewers baseball at Milwaukee's Miller Park (June 5), and Indiana Amish Country (June 12-13). We're in danger of cancelling our March 16 "Gathering of the Green" trip to Davenport IA unless we have a rush of signups in the next week or so. Check out all of our trips at www.stephensoncfb.org or call (815) 232-3186 for more information.

Black Hills rush continues

Our September 22-28, 2012 Black Hills trip with Tri-State Travel has already filled the first bus and is working on a second one, which indicates what a great trip we've got planned for you. Check out the details at www.stephensoncfb.org or stop by our office for information, and don't hesitate if you're interested in signing up. You must be a Farm Bureau member to participate in this excursion.

Bruce Johnson is the manager of the Stephenson County Farm Bureau.