

# HISTORIC INTERPRETATION OF INSTITUTION MANAGEMENT

## Introduction

“...if we ever return to a similar institution for a longer stay we hope that it will be at home as well equipped and efficiently managed as this one in Dallas County.”

*Harry Cutler and Lucy Nelson (1950s)*

“After starting out as the Dallas County ‘poor farm’, the Dallas County home has emerged as one of finest county homes in the state.”

*Dallas Church News (1972)*

Located along U.S. Highway 169, approximately 3.5 miles north of Adel, Iowa, the Dallas County Farm and Care Facility is one of the few county farms that still remain in the United States. Starting as the Dallas County Poor Farm in 1869, it began with 40 acres of cropland in the southeast part of the current farmland (Smith 2001). The legal background of establishing the county poor farm was based on the Territorial Legislation passed in 1842, which permitted local governments to purchase farmland to help support the poor in the area (Parker 1980). Hence, between 1869 and the 1950s, the Dallas County Poor Farm supported many elderly single-male farmers, retired railroad men and construction workers in the central Iowa region. In fact, most of these had mental illness problems due to alcohol. Therefore, they could not save enough money for themselves or gain economic aid from their families.

In order to support the increasing numbers of residents, the Dallas County Farm purchased lands totaling 526 acres between 1869 and 1917. Following the period from the 1930s to the 1950s, the role of Dallas County Farm was in a transition stage. As the immigration trend in central Iowa stabilized after the 1920s, the number of elderly poor decreased. The institution name was changed to Dallas County Home and Hospital in the middle of the 20th century. After the 1930s, the Dallas County Farm began to accept mentally ill and mentally disabled persons as new residents.

Starting in the early 1960s, Farm steward Homer Smith developed a strong economically sustainable program by involving 15 to 20 high-functioning residents in the farming operation. These financially feasible programs were successful under current administrator Karen Smith through the 1970s, 80s, and early 90s. With the decentralization trend of care facilities, the Dallas County Farm and Care Facility did not have enough new and young patients to support the economically sustainable program. Hence, the diversified farming operation was stopped in 1994. After 1994, the major farming program was based on corn and livestock such as beef cattle, hogs, and egg hens. Currently, three full time staff and one part time staff help manage 250 acres of farmable land.

In 1998, the Dallas County Board of Supervisors signed a contract with a private vendor for the Care Facilities. Management was shifted to a privatized care institution, Dallas County Care Facility Inc., which allowed acceptance of patients who were eligible for Title XIX support to reside in-house (Smith 2001).



## Analysis

### Financial and economic profile

Starting with 40 acres in 1869 (Smith 2001), the Dallas County Farm and Care Facility currently has grown to 526 acres (see figure 9). All land was purchased during the period 1869 to 1917 (see figure 9). In fact, only around 250 acres of land are suitable for row crop farming and the other lands are steep river valley slope, floodplain, and sand bar (see figure 1). The Farm is public, a responsibility of the Dallas County Board of Supervisors. Because farming operations generate the most income to support the Dallas County Farm and Care Facility, the administrator can develop farming programs that meet the institution and residents' needs.

Because many official records and documents from before 1950 were lost in the fire in the old county court house (Smith 2001), the financial profile was based on historical news and interviews with the current administrator, Karen Smith. From 1869 to the 1930s, the Care Facility was operated as a poor farm, and the detailed financial background is unknown. The second stage was a transition period in which the poor farm changed its function to accept mentally ill and mentally disabled persons. During that period, a part of old care center was used as a county hospital. It was possible because the county government began providing budget aid during the period from the 1930s to 1950s.

Based on newspaper accounts from two local journalists' articles in the 1950s, the Farm and Care Facility was operated as a dairy farm with large scale fruit and vegetable production (see figure 4). Meanwhile, income was mainly from fruits raised on the Farm and 400 to 500 half-gallon jars of fruit and vegetables were canned every year (Cutler 1950s). In the 60s and 70s, the institution maintained the basic farming patterns as in the 50s. However, the scale of dairy farm expanded and the species of livestock increased as steward Homer Smith tried to apply more aggressive farming programs to gain more income (see figure 5).

In 1972, several counties in Iowa (such as Madison and Greene) closed their county farm homes due to rising costs of operation without substantial tax hikes (Dallas Church News 1972). After four years, only 76 county farms still remained in Iowa with a total of 4,500 patients. In 1980, there were 68 of 99 county farms still remaining in the state of Iowa, with a total of 17,200 acres of farmland ranging from 39 acres in Plymouth to 526 acres in Dallas County (the largest one in Iowa) (Parker 1980). However, the hardship of financial feasibility did not emerge until late 80s. In addition, the increasing costs of care programs and shortage of in-house labor, political trends, and unstable market of agriculture product were also factors that challenged the funding of the Dallas County Farm and Care Facility. The current budget sources for care facility operation are from selling corn and beef cattle, county government financial aid and social security funds from some residents.

### Care Center and Farm structures

Beginning as a county poor farm in 1869, the Dallas County Farm and Care Facility has over 130 years of history. Two agriculture buildings and one water tower represent historical and cultural significance on site. The large barn that remains today is one of the original three barns built over one hundred years ago (Smith 2001). The type of barn is the English style for dairy cows. Because Dallas County is located in one of the oldest settlement regions of the Des Moines River valley, this English barn is a common style in the central Iowa region. However, the English

dairy barn in Dallas County Farm and Care Facility could be the largest size barn and most complex structure in the central Iowa region.

Another significant example of farm architecture is an old brick carriage house near the new Care Facility building. The bricks used for constructing the carriage house were possibly from local brick and tile factory located in Adel or Redfield. The architecture of this carriage house is rarely seen in the region because most of the old carriage houses were made of wood for lower cost. The historical significance of this building is possibly as old as the English dairy barn.

Built during the 1910s to 1920s, the water tower (of Anson Marston design) is another historical and cultural treasure owned by the Dallas County Farm and Care Facility. The designer, Dr. Anson Marston, was the first dean of Engineering at Iowa State University. Because of costly maintenance fee, few original water towers of the Anson Marston design still remain in Iowa today.

### **Institution identification and care program profile**

Because of accommodating different types residents in various time periods, the Dallas County Farm and Care Facility was labeled as different names in much historical news (see figure 7 and 8). Following the changes in government due to human rights, the living conditions and care programs for residents were greatly ameliorated after the 1970s, especially under the direction of current administrator Karen Smith.

### **Documentation and data analysis**

From 1869 to the 1980s, the Dallas County Farm and Care Facility sustained its care programs with the following resources:

- Sufficient in-house labor
- Diversified farming operation
- Strong financial aid from county government
- Charity programs support from various civic organizations

After the 1990s, the Dallas County Farm and Care Facility faced decentralization of its functions due to the following:

- Current political trend in which human service programs are not a priority in the budget planning
- Shortage of in-house labor
- Stress of economic feasibility from increasing costs
- New urban sprawl infrastructure needs slice away the county budget, reducing funds for human service program
- Unstable market prices in corn and beef

## **Issues**

General issues about the management of Dallas County Farm and Care Facility include the following:

- Continue the record-keeping and information updates about the institution management and land use
- A national trend in downsizing or eliminating county farms
- Enhancing the institution's identity and functions
- Extending the institution and public land functions to involve more public participation
- Improving financial feasibility for the institution
- Recruiting more new, young long-term residents as a new labor force

Issues related to the cultural, historical and natural resource management of the Dallas County Farm and Care Facility include the following:

- Apply environmental rehabilitation programs in woodland area and river corridors to improve ecological and utilitarian functions
- Apply soil erosion control in south-facing woodland slope and include a path to the wetland-pasture area
- Develop immediate restoration of historical agriculture buildings
- Develop access to the woodland area and river corridor for facility staff and future public use
- Involve current institution property in future regional park management system
- Develop well functioning circulation patterns around the care and farm facility
- Design a sign display or exhibition boards to educate the public on the historical and cultural significance of the institution

## **Recommendation for future management**

With such rich cultural, historical and ecological resources on site, the Dallas County Farm and Care Facility is an ideal environment for demonstrating new public land trust program. Learning from this program, the possible scenarios for its future development are endless. However, it is important that the future development plans should meet certain objectives and criteria as well as acknowledge existing limitations.

## **Objectives**

- Attract more public and private funds for the institution
- Develop institution's function as a key node for introduction and education for a central Iowa regional park system
- Develop a new financially feasible model of public land trust program on site
- Enhance the Farm and Care Facility's role as a "Window of Central Iowa"
- Enhance historical significance and functions of the institution
- Extend the institution's identity and functions

- Improve the institution's economic sustainability by involving more public participation in management activities
- Preserve farming tradition on site
- Rehabilitate biodiversity and utility functions in the woodland area and the river corridors

## **Criteria**

- Development plans should show the public that the Dallas County Farm and Care Facility is a valuable natural and historical resource and they can provide support and help in a way beyond the current institution role and functions
- Documentation display system should be established to inform the public about the management situation and offer historical data about resource management within the institution
- Grow and operate high value agriculture programs and activities to increase income for the institution
- Because the land status is public land, new management programs should focus on cultural development, education, human services, and public recreation functions to serve the public
- New economic feasibility plan should not jeopardize the farming tradition and property integrity on site
- New economic and agriculture development programs on site should avoid competing with the business of local family farms
- Woodland area should be rehabilitated, well planned, and managed to restore its biodiversity, flood control, and water purification functions before opening to public use

## **Limitations**

- Current political and economic trends do not favor putting human service as a priority in the budget planning
- Current Medicaid program and county budget management prohibit the Dallas County Farm and Care Facility from accepting new, young members to improve its labor conditions
- Potential government and institutional bureaucracy can decrease the flexibility of decision-making on public land use program
- Political pressure to decrease budget spending on environmental enhancement, improvement and protection programs

## **Implementation**

The following proposed programs include several public participation activities, which can benefit both public welfare and the institution. All of these programs can be operated under public land trust program. In fact, enhancing and extending the Dallas County Farm and Care Center institution's identification and functions is a priority in my agenda. Almost all of the following programs can use or modify the existing facilities on site without extra budget spending on new structures.

## **Potential Programs Supported by Public Funds**

- Century Farm/Living Historic Farm and Museum
- Central Iowa Native Plants Reservation and Research Center
- Domestic Livestock Species and Gene Reservation Center
- National/Regional County Farm Museum
- Iowa /Midwest Historical Rural (Agriculture) Architecture & Landscape Management Research Center
- National/Regional/ISU Field Studio & Lab in Central Iowa
- National/ Regional/Iowa/ISU Art Workshop & Studio in Central Iowa
- Research/Visitor Center of Central Iowa Regional Park
- Juvenile and Minor Degree Criminal Correction Programs as new labor source

## **Potential Programs Supported by Private Funds**

- Addition for self-pay retirement community
- Adult continuing-education programs
- Art workshop and studio
- Bed and Breakfast service for visitors
- Healthy diet, anti-cancer and chronic disease research center with organic farming program
- Horse training camp
- Horticulture programs
- Mental health, personal rehabilitation, psychological research and retreat area for minor depression problems
- Summer K-12 environmental learning camp

## **Conclusion**

The following is what we can learn from the institution management in Dallas County Farm and Care Facility:

- For successful institution and public land management, the administrator should develop more aggressive programs to secure financial feasibility and institution identification
- Strong public relations with various civic, private, and public organizations, institution management can gain powerful support to survive under the ever-changing economy, social and political environments
- The decision-making process should be more flexible and with long-term vision
- Human service programs are a positive social investment in stabilizing the community social structure
- Biodiversity rehabilitation can be included in the institution management plan for enhancing the value and uniqueness of the institution's environment and identification

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