A group of 62 Extension specialists and advisory leaders met this past May 19 in Charlotte for the fourth Southeast Region Strengthening Extension Advisory Leaders (SEAL) Conference.

The conference was initiated in 2000, inspired by a small number of dedicated professionals from six Southeastern states who saw the value of maximizing the dedication of advisory leadership. They organized a venue where collaboration among the Southeastern states could occur biannually, with the goal of sharing resources and enhancing advisory leaders’ skills and support.

Directed by Joy Staton, Extension Advisory System Leader, the SEAL planning team and a writing team representing seven states hosted the conference. These teams developed objectives that would identify critical needs in advisory systems and pooled resources to develop curricula, materials and training to address those needs. Staton showcased the successful use of advisory leaders’ skills by enlisting 10 members of the N.C. State Advisory Council to help with hosting, assessing, setting up technology, introducing speakers and reporting.

The conference kicked off with a welcome from the N.C. Cooperative Extension Service, followed by a history of the objectives of SEAL by Dr. Paul Warner from Kentucky Cooperative Extension. Then Dr. Jon Ort, director of the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service, delivered an address on the value of volunteer leaders to Extension.

Dr. James H. Johnson Jr., director of the Urban Investment Strategies Center of the Kenan Institute at UNC-Chapel Hill, offered statistics showing the changing demographics of volunteers.

The following day, participants had a choice of concurrent sessions, including Orienting New Advisory Board Members and New Faculty, Teaching Extension Volunteers How to Advocate and Market Cooperative Extension, and New Methods in Extension Volunteerism and How They Impact Advisory Leaders.

Dr. Chris Boleman, Texas AgriLife Extension Service, and Noland Ramsey, past chair of N.C. SAC, closed the conference, challenging all to discern why people volunteer and how to engage their passions.

To view the curricula developed for this conference and those in previous years, go to http://srpin.msstate.edu/seal/09curriculum/index.html.

### West Central cluster meeting draws from four counties

Advisory leaders and Cooperative Extension staff members from Ashe, Wilkes, Alleghany and Surry counties met on Aug. 20 at the Upper Mountain Research Station in Laurel Springs. Approximately 50 people from the four counties, Research Station personnel and an Ashe County Commissioner attended.

Les Miller, research station superintendent, hosted the program, which included guided tours of the station’s organic production project, goat paddock and bramble research plots.

Ron Joyner, State Advisory Council member from West Central District, served as the official greeter. Charles Young, a long-time livestock specialist and Extension agent from Ashe County, spoke about the importance of Extension in our local communities. Carolyn Shepherd, CED of the Ashe County office, and Dr. Deborah Crandall, West Central District Extension director, thanked everyone for their continued support for Extension.

Deborah Crandall (left), West Central District Extension director; Noland Ramsey, past SAC chair; and SAC member Charles Mosley, West Central District, were among participants at the SEAL conference.
North Carolina has a rich history of educational outreach from our two land-grant universities, N.C. State and N.C. A&T State. But the recent economic downturn has taken a toll on extension nationally, and North Carolina Cooperative Extension is no different. However, thanks in large measure to a strong advisory leadership system, we have fared better than many other extension organizations nationally.

The latest issue of the American Vegetable Grower magazine highlighted severe proposals and cuts to Extension programs in four states: In Michigan, the governor proposed to cut the budget in half, but fortunately the legislature voted against the drastic measure. In Washington, the governor proposed a 20 percent cut. In Iowa, a massive restructuring will eliminate nearly 100 county and regional Extension administrative positions to be replaced with 20 regional directors and one supervisor. And in Ohio, Extension faces a 24 percent decrease in funds through 2011.

In North Carolina, however, Cooperative Extension’s budget aligns with other higher education programs, which the state General Assembly has tried to protect from deep cuts. The cut this year to Extension and agricultural research will amount to 5.1 and 4.3 percent, respectively.

Those of us in Extension administration are working to minimize the impact these cuts will have on the growers, consumers, families and young people we serve. To position us to make the cuts, we instituted a voluntary early federal retirement program, which some 30 Extension educators accepted. Also, because of natural attrition, we had about the same number of regular retirements. We will certainly miss our recent retirees, because they represent a deep body of wisdom and experience. But the retirements allow us to rebuild Cooperative Extension for a new era of new challenges.

My point in telling you all this is to let you know that while we are facing difficult budget times, we have a lot to be thankful for as we work to extend our tradition of excellence and impact throughout the state.

The changes, though they have been difficult, have given us a tougher, more viable system that continues to garner strong support from county, state and federal governments. We owe that support, I believe, to two factors: first, the impact we demonstrate every day on North Carolina’s economy, environment and quality of life; and second, the great job that you, as a member of our advisory leadership system, do in advocating for and advising Extension.

We sincerely and deeply appreciate all you do.
Wake County Master Gardeners: 30 years and growing

By Angela Hertzberg
Wake County Master Gardeners

On June 4, Wake County Master Gardeners celebrated their 30th anniversary with a panel-discussion presentation of the group’s history, a covered dish luncheon, a plant exchange and a birthday cake.

The panel included Victor Lynn, former Wake County Extension director; Erv Evans, Extension horticulture associate and coordinator, state Master Gardeners; Pam Beck, a Wake County MGV from 1988 to 2001; Sherrill Register, MGV 1988 to present; Arabelle Plonk, who also entered the MGV program in 1988; and Dr. Carl Matyac, Extension horticulture agent from 1996 to 2008.

The official anniversary date of the Wake County Master Gardeners is March 21, 1979. The idea had come from Lynn, then an Extension agent, who attended a national meeting of county agents and heard about a program called Garden Leaders. He returned to Wake County and worked to start a similar program at home. He piqued the interest of a Men’s Garden Club member, who helped get the momentum going. Their first efforts were answering phones to help the agent handle the huge volume of gardening calls. And, as they say, the rest is history.

Wake Master Gardeners currently have 129 members and three Emeritus members and began a new training class this past September. Programs now include five demonstration gardens, three WaterWise gardens, horticultural therapy, Successful Gardening Clinics, youth horticulture and a speaker’s bureau.

According to Bob Kellam, chair of the Wake County Extension Advisory Council (and a Master Gardener), the MGVs are an important voice on the county Advisory Council. In 2008 they helped persuade the county commissioners to reverse staffing and policy decisions in the Department of Environmental Services that would have had a detrimental impact on Extension horticulture and agriculture programs.

Advisory members celebrate with 4-H

By Sylvia Churchwell

On July 21, a group of Lee County Advisory members, along with county Extension Director Susan Condlin and 4-H Agent Bill Stone, joined more than 1,300 4-H members and supporters for a 100-year birthday party. The celebration was held at the North Carolina State Fair Exposition Center.

Prior to dinner, guests greeted old friends, shared conversation with 4-H’ers about current projects and reminisced as they viewed the historic artifacts that were on display in the Kerr Scott Building. 4-H Alumni visited tables that held familiar pictures and documents.

4-H memories were shared and remarks were given by N.C. Secretary of State Elaine Marshall and state Sen. Dan Blue, along with Dr. Johnny Wynne, dean of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at NCSU, and Larry Wooten, president of N.C. Farm Bureau, sponsor of the event.

Following was an audience-pleasing presentation honoring the 100 individuals who were inducted into the 4-H Hall of Fame in earlier ceremonies at the Jane S. McKimmon Center. Then state 4-H director Dr. Marshall Stewart led a rousing rendition of “Happy Birthday,” and all were treated to N.C. 4-H’s Centennial Ice Cream, “Campfire Delight.”
SAC’s Shelly Willingham became involved with Cooperative Extension because he saw it as the most proactive organization that affects the most citizens — and through a desire to see more participation by people in the city and schoolchildren inside the city limits.

Willingham’s experience is extensive in the political arena, and he brings to SAC a wealth of knowledge about working with our government representatives.

Willingham grew up in Rocky Mount, where he completed high school before pursuing his post-secondary education at Elizabeth City State University, the Washington, D.C., Police Academy and Howard University. He has extensive experience in business, human resources, education and public service, including serving as election campaign director for U.S. Rep. G.K. Butterfield.

He serves in Edgecombe County as member of the Juvenile Crime Prevention Council, Citizens for Economic and Educational Justice, the state Democratic Party executive committee and the N.C. State ABC board of directors, as well as an honorary life member of the Rocky Mount Area Chamber of Commerce. He currently chairs the Edgecombe County ABC board.

He has previously served as a state representative, an Edgecombe County Commissioner and a Rocky Mount city school board member.

He is currently a political consultant to a candidate for the 2010 election and assisting parents with concerns about the educational system in Edgecombe and Nash counties.

He and his wife, Alethea, live in Rocky Mount. They have two adult children and two grandchildren.

### Churchwell at ALS newsletter helm

Sylvia Johnson Churchwell has been a member of the Extension Advisory Council in Lee County since 2000 and co-chaired the Council for two years. She spent her school years in Chatham County, her early career in Guilford County and her final years of employment in Lee County.

Churchwell’s avid support of North Carolina Cooperative Extension began in 1997, shortly after her retirement from the N.C. Public schools as a high-school counselor and as a part-time community college accounting instructor. She joined the Lee County Extension & Community Association (formerly Extension Homemakers), where she recognized how citizens are impacted by the Extension programs in the areas of education and service that reach outside of the public education system. She became a supportive volunteer and advocate for Extension.

She is excited about being a part of the state-wide network which helps market the strengths of Extension. Serving in numerous community leadership roles has helped her grow in her understanding of how Extension, along with an extensive volunteer structure, seeks to improve the lives of citizens across the state.

She and her husband, Jim, live on a horse farm in southern Lee County. They have three daughters, six grandchildren and their beloved stray mutt, Dixie Chick.

### New district director Cowden supports ALS

Jim Cowden, who became the North Central District Extension director August 1, leads 17 counties along North Carolina’s north central tier.

Previously, he was the Extension director in Rowan County, serving eight years. He served in the same capacity for nearly 17 years in Pennsylvania — and six years as an agriculture education teacher.

Cowden is a strong supporter of advisory leadership, having utilized advisory leaders successfully throughout his career. He learned early that advisory leadership is important to the success of an Extension agent.

“Members of Extension advisory are truly advocates of the educational programming Cooperative Extension provides its citizens,” he says. “Advisory members may help with an assessment of the community to determine what specific needs there are, assist agents in developing and marketing educational programs and encourage participants to evaluate programs and determine value. They usually represent various communities in the county, and they assist in getting the Cooperative Extension message out to the public.”