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GROWING COMMUNITY  
FOUNDATIONS AS  
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THE GREAT LAKES COMMUNITY FOUNDATIONS  
ENVIRONMENTAL COLLABORATIVE



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LESSONS LEARNED FROM PHASE I OF THE GREAT LAKES  
COMMUNITY FOUNDATIONS ENVIRONMENTAL COLLABORATIVE

September 1998

by

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With support from the  
**Great Lakes Protection Fund &  
Charles Stewart Mott Foundation**

Published by the **Council of Michigan  
Foundations**—an association of grantmakers and  
corporations which make grants for charitable  
purposes. As a membership organization, our  
mission is to increase, to enhance, and to improve  
philanthropy in Michigan.



# Introduction

Read any public opinion poll about what people care about—the environment is nearly always among the top five concerns. People care about what happens in their own backyards and they feel strongly about maintaining a safe and healthy community in which to live. Community foundations have an opportunity to tap into this strong base of public interest and apply their civic leadership and grantmaking abilities to ensure that environmental concerns and interests are given the same level of care and thoughtful consideration as other key issues like jobs, health, recreation and education.

In recent years there have been three important collaborative efforts that focus the potential of community foundations on the environment. The New Hampshire, Vermont and Maine community foundations partnered with the Ford Foundation in the Northern New England Sustainable Communities Implementation Project. Six community foundations focused their attention on the Gulf of Maine. The Great Lakes Community Foundation Environmental Collaborative is the third such effort. This publication summarizes the lessons learned from the first phase of this Collaborative, which ends in December 1998.

“Communities across America are growing and sprawling—diligent and thoughtful work is required to ensure a pattern of growth that is equitable, economically viable and environmentally sound. Because community foundations are key civic leaders at the local level, they should be vital partners in efforts to plan for the future of the communities they serve.”

— Henry Richmond, founder, 1000 Friends of Oregon

## THE GREAT LAKES COMMUNITY FOUNDATION ENVIRONMENTAL COLLABORATIVE

In 1993, the Great Lakes Protection Fund, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and the Joyce Foundation convened a meeting of Great Lakes community foundations to discuss their participation in a collaborative effort to increase support for local environmental protection efforts. These foundations recognized the critical role community foundations could serve in protecting the Great Lakes ecosystem.

Place-based environmental efforts can garner a great deal of local support, thus increasing the potential for success. Community foundations already serve as convenors and facilitators on other local efforts such as youth issues and community health issues; thus, as a group, they have some expertise and local credibility with such roles.

Community foundations are the fastest growing sector in organized philanthropy (increasing by sixty percent since 1988<sup>1</sup>). Capturing some of that energy and interest for protecting and conserving the local environment was seen as an untapped opportunity.

The initial meeting led to the creation of the Great Lakes Community Foundations Environmental Collaborative (the Collaborative) in the spring of 1996. Under the leadership of the Council of Michigan Foundations (CMF) and with input from a nine-member Project Advisory Committee (listed at the end of this publication), three goals for the initial two-year phase of the Collaborative were established:

1. Educate the trustees and staff of the participating community foundations;
2. Strengthen participating community foundations' abilities to convene the community on environmental issues; and
3. Initiate or increase participants' environmental funds.

In a competitive process, twenty-one community foundations in six Great Lakes states and Ontario were chosen from thirty-nine applicant shoreline community foundations for phase one of the Collaborative. A list of the 21 community foundations with appropriate contacts is also included at the end of this report. Grants totaling \$640,000 from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and Great Lakes Protection Fund enabled CMF to provide a \$15,000 matching grant to each community foundation to establish or increase their environmental endowments. An additional \$5,000 technical assistance grant was also awarded to each to complement on-site and phone technical assistance. Each community foundation was obligated to:

- Educate its trustees and staff about the Great Lakes environment and environmental grantmaking,
- Convene at least two community meetings on local/regional issues of environmental concern,
- Host a meeting with potential donors to discuss a permanent environmental endowment, and
- Raise at least \$10,000 (\$35,000 if the foundation had assets exceeding \$10 million) in new matching funds by the end of 1998.

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<sup>1</sup>The Foundation Center, *Foundation Giving*, 1998 ed., New York, NY

# Lessons Learned

Because the Collaborative's initial phase will end in December 1998, an assessment was undertaken to determine progress towards these goals, capture lessons learned, and provide the participants, CMF, the funders, and others anticipating such an effort, information to help improve the delivery of services. The assessment consisted of a review of background materials of the Collaborative and participants, and a written survey with a follow-up telephone interview.

Following is a discussion of lessons learned from phase one based on the report of the assessment.

1. **THE EFFORT IS WORTH IT—DONORS ARE RESPONDING.** Participants felt that the Collaborative was worthwhile. "The community needs it and the trustees have embraced it strongly," stated one participant. "The grant has had a dramatic impact on the foundation," noted another participant, "it has forced us to grapple with many fundamental organizational issues such as staffing levels, our role in the community, and our role on often contentious environmental issues." Still another exclaimed, "I did not expect it to be so worthwhile in terms of energizing staff, trustees and the community."

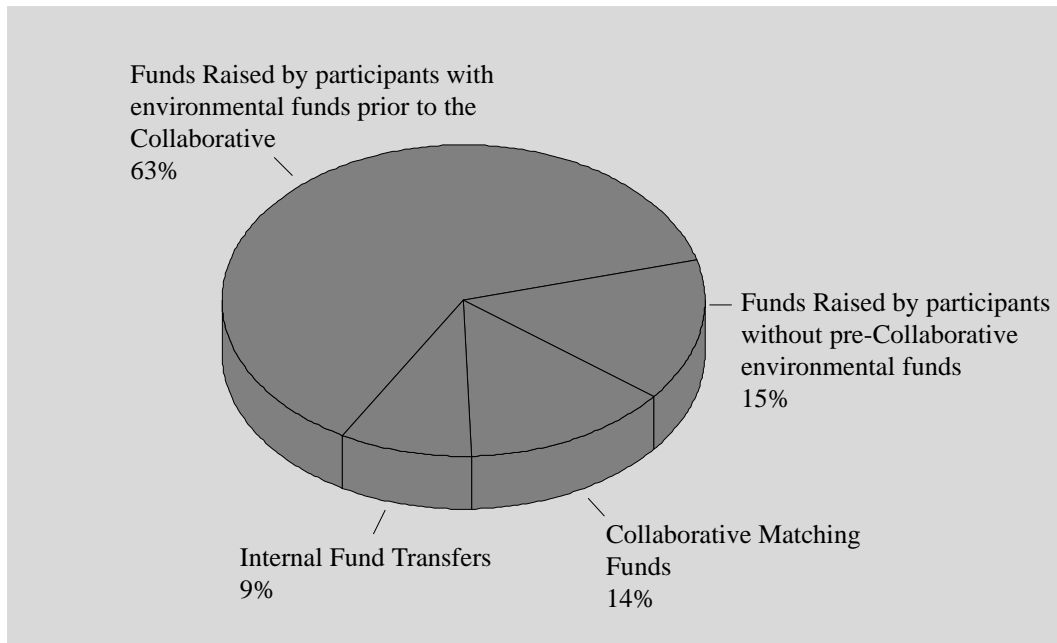
The most quantifiable measure of worth is a snapshot of new funds. The amount and number of environmental endowments and annual funds increased by seventy-six and seventy-nine percent, respectively (Table A). Prior to the Collaborative, eleven of the participants had at least one environmental fund cumulatively totaling \$2,251,500. To date, all participants have established at least one fund with cumulative totals of \$3,952,600.

Table A  
Amount and Number of Environmental Funds Pre-Collaborative and Currently

<b>Environmental Funds</b>	<b>Pre-Collaborative</b>	<b>Currently</b>	<b>Percent Change</b>
Amount (US\$)	2,251,500	3,952,600	+76
Number	29	62	+79

About twenty-three percent of the additional dollars raised came from either the CMF matching funds awarded to date (\$232,500) or from participants' pre-existing donor-advised funds that were transferred into the environmental endowment (\$145,000) (Chart A). Fifteen percent of the new monies (\$253,900) were raised by participants that had no environmentally-related funds prior to the Collaborative. The remaining sixty-three percent of the new funds were raised by the eleven participants that had one or more environmental funds prior to the Collaborative.

Chart A  
Source of Additional Monies to Participants' Environmental Funds  
Since Inception of the Collaborative



**2. COMMUNITY FOUNDATIONS WANT AND NEED OBJECTIVE INFORMATION ON ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES IN THEIR REGIONS.** The Collaborative provided the participants with many reference books and reports on key environmental issues in the Great Lakes. Called the "Environmental Tool Kit," some participants shared the information with their trustees and advisory committees, some displayed the materials at community meetings, some shared it internally, and some simply put it in a corner. Efforts to educate trustees and staff were deemed successful by all but two of the foundations.

"The Collaborative has encouraged an educational process that helped dispel some of the stereotypes associated with the environment."

— May Wong, director of grants and community initiatives, Community Foundation of Toronto

The information presented to the participants was clearly needed. Furthermore, the quality was considered excellent. The problem was the sheer volume of it. "It was just too much stuff," noted one participant. In more recent mailings, the Collaborative has focused on distributing executive summaries of key reports. There is a need for the information to continue to be screened by a knowledgeable intermediary such as the Collaborative consultants and members of the Collaborative advisory committee.

**3. THE MORE ENGAGED STAFF, TRUSTEES OR OTHER VOLUNTEERS ARE IN THE PROCESS, THE BETTER THE OUTCOME.** Participants demonstrating the most progress in achieving the three goals of the Collaborative are those with staff, trustees and volunteers who are engaged and committed to the goal of being environmental grantmakers.

As to be expected, leadership is key to success—whether it be a staff member, trustee or community volunteer—who has the energy, and time to embrace building the environmental endowment. Uncommitted and overworked staff, an unwilling board and a poorly directed advisory committee seemed to be common challenges faced by the four participants behind schedule in meeting the Collaborative's activities.

When engaged, good things happen especially with trustees. For example:

"As stewards of one of the most beautiful lake fronts on the Great Lakes, we in Muskegon have a special legacy to preserve and protect. I am very pleased that our own community foundation will be joining in this effort to build awareness of the issues surrounding this wonderful resource."

—Dr. William Schroeder, trustee, Community Foundation for Muskegon County

- Thirteen of the twenty participants established goals for the environmental endowment that exceeded the matching conditions of the Collaborative. These goals ranged from \$50,000 to \$14 million with a cumulative total of over \$20 million.
- Trustees of thirteen participants contributed over \$105,000 to the endowments (representing six percent of the increase in environmental endowments).
- Nineteen of the twenty-one participants have expressed continued institutional support for the endowment.

Engagement, however, has its costs. A majority of the participants noted that the project consumed much more time than anticipated. Several advised that others thinking about undertaking similar efforts should build in more staff and volunteer time.

Two participants managed this issue by delegating most of the activities required by the Collaborative to non-profit intermediaries. While saving staff and volunteer time, the savings in time were offset by the loss of the long-term benefits of trustee and staff education, convening and fund development.

**4** SURPRISE AT THE DEPTH OF UNMET NEED. The depth of need and desire for support, from groups interested in promoting environmental needs, surprised many of the community foundation participants. Participants reported that more people than they ever expected attended the community meetings. One community foundation executive director noted that "they didn't want to go home."

A February 1998 editorial from the *Muskegon Chronicle* in Michigan best summarizes this need and opportunity for community foundations. *What this discrete and separate set of (environmental) organizations seem to have been lacking is broad public identity, which everyday citizens, not just the activists could rally around. The Community Foundation for Muskegon County has begun to address this lack starting with an environmental forum.*

**5** A LOCAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE TO THE ENVIRONMENTAL FUND IS IMPORTANT FOR THE SUCCESS AND CREDIBILITY OF THE PROJECT. Participants were encouraged to create a local advisory committee. Some local advisory committees had broad responsibilities including educating the trustees on environmental issues; assisting with the content of the community meetings; recommending goals, objectives and grantmaking guidelines for the environmental endowment; and reviewing environmental grant applications. Others had a narrower role focused on one of the above responsibilities and/or on raising the funds for the environmental endowment. When

provided with clear expectations and directions, the committees performed reasonably well. But without clear directions from the trustees and staff, their usefulness was diminished.

Advisory committees were viewed as objective and credible when they had a diverse membership. A diverse membership includes representatives from a broad cross section of interests in the community including: colleges and universities, environmental organizations, corporate, civic and trade organizations and government (local, county and state).

"This Fund is a unique financial resource that encourages innovative thinking on the most local level."

-Dan Reszka, chair of the Grand Traverse Regional Community Foundation's Advisory Committee

In addition to helping with credibility and visibility, the Advisory Committee produced new opportunities to leverage other resources and form new partnerships for the community foundation. For example, the Rochester Area Foundation in New York reported that convening the advisors last spring led to the Foundation's inclusion in two larger collaborative initiatives.

6. TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE IS AS IMPORTANT AS A CHALLENGE GRANT. The Collaborative includes a combination of technical assistance: site visits, phone consultations, an annual training workshop, a listserv, an educational toolkit, and phone conference calls, along with the challenge grant. The types of service participants benefited from the most were those that were personal, face-to-face, usually on-site by consultants Sheila Leahy and David Hahn-Baker or over the phone—services which were community foundation specific. Though not necessarily adaptive in the formal sessions, the annual meetings were another popular service. One participant noted that the annual meetings "forced us to focus." The meetings allowed plenty of time for participants to share with one another, in formal and informal venues. A common comment was, "The advice, examples, and motivation of consultants and colleagues have been invaluable."

The technical assistance offered in fund development received mixed reviews, primarily due to the wide diversity of the participating community foundations and the Collaborative's inability to tailor it to individual needs. Some of the community foundations with strong asset bases felt that the development support was too basic, that they needed more sophisticated support specifically addressing building field-of-interest funds, especially one considered as potentially controversial as an environmental endowment. Those with fewer assets felt that the development support was

not sufficiently geared to smaller funders, that it overlooked the needs and challenges faced by small, rural community foundations.

Participants appreciated the flexible technical assistance funds that were used for retaining part-time consultants and purchasing modems. Together these technical assistance pieces build the foundation from which long-term rewards are produced. The first two years of the Collaborative elicited these comments: "only the beginning," a "catalyst," "seed money" and an "incentive to begin concentrating on the environment." One participant noted, "Hopefully, it will provide a long-term reward and value to the community."

**7** ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION IS AN IMPORTANT TOOL. Most participants were less than excited about the E-mail and Listserv offered by the Collaborative. There seemed to be three reasons: inadequate equipment to access electronic communication, weak skills or a lack of experience in using the technology, and lack of timely and sufficiently specific responses to posted queries—especially true on the Listserv.

However, participants recognize the need and are interested in enhancing their abilities to use technology. Electronic communication is a critical networking and information access tool that cannot be ignored, particularly for an initiative that covers a large geographic area such as this Collaborative. While there are plans to expand the role of these electronic tools in Phase II of the Collaborative, the directors of participating community foundations need assistance in making the case for limited operating dollars to include investments in this technology. In addition, to streamline the amount of necessary information going to the participants, the environmental library should be made virtual and linked to the vast resources of the Internet.

**8** THE CONVENING ROLE WAS STRENGTHENED. Eighteen of the participants convened at least one community meeting with nearly two thousand individuals attending. The Collaborative did provide an opportunity to convene communities around an often controversial issue—in a balanced nonpartisan manner. For example, the Rochester Area Foundation hosted *Caring for Creeks*, a discussion attended by more than 140 people from upstate New York that focused on three local watersheds that affect many municipalities and livelihoods. Given that the median number of meetings convened by each participant was two, it is unclear how many of these individuals attended more than one meeting.

Of the eighteen community foundations convening community meetings, seven believed their convening skills were strengthened by the experience in the Collaborative. These seven each have endowments of less than \$12 million. Five of the seven did not have an environmental endowment prior to the Collaborative.

In some communities businesses were heavily represented—as high as 95%, while in others they were absent. This held true for environmental groups as well. The exception to the rule was the religious community that was not included. As one participant noted, “It did not even cross my mind to invite religious leaders.”

The wide variability appears to reflect the participant’s heterogeneity in their views and fears about environmental issues within a community context. Some participants were too fearful of their donor base and of the community-at-large to get too close to environmental activists, while others were concerned that the environmental groups would feel ignored if they were not the primary audience for the community meetings.

“Our role as a convener has triggered invitations from several non-profits to work on regional planning issues. The Collaborative has been invaluable in repositioning the foundation in the community as a leader.”

—Gail Johnstone, Executive Director,  
Community Foundation of Buffalo  
County (New York)

9 THE COLLECTIVE, COLLABORATIVE APPROACH WORKS WELL. Because a number of community foundations participated in the Collaborative, trustees of the participating community foundations felt the effort credible and less risky than if they undertook the effort alone. Also helping reduce their anxiety was the support of two well known and respected foundations, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and the Great Lakes Protection Fund. Consultants for the Collaborative have encouraged participants to share experiences and to learn from and support one another.

“The Collaborative is a wonderful opportunity for a novice to learn and grow.”

—Dr. Joseph Leek, Trustee, Duluth  
Superior Community Foundation

The Collaborative provided the flexible outside funds that allowed the community foundations to create the infrastructure for an environmental endowment including: the internal formation of commitment, committees and endowment (and the education and process needed to establish them). A community foundation that wants to expand its role as an environmental grantmaker should invest the time to form partnerships with other funders in order to build the comfort-level needed to be a proactive community leader in dealing with this important issue.

## 10.

LAND USE, WATERSHED MANAGEMENT, AND BROWNFIELD REDEVELOPMENT ARE THE FOCAL POINTS. As a result of the community meetings convened in Phase I of the Collaborative, there is consensus that the three main environmental issues they all have in common are land use planning, watershed management and brownfield redevelopment.

For example, the Bay Area Community Foundation in Bay City, Michigan, reports that two groups from its community forum, working on brownfield redevelopment and urban sprawl, have joined together to form a land use task force. The Racine Community Foundation in Wisconsin will be establishing a local group to deal with the Root River watershed. The Sarnia Community Foundation in Ontario is working on the Center by the Bay Environmental Project involving the reuse of shoreline, previously used for stockpiling gravel for various industries.

The participants have built on past efforts where possible, such as in Michigan's Upper Peninsula where the Keweenaw Community Foundation is using the expertise of the GEM Center for Environmental Outreach funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. The GEM Center's experience along with the Community Foundation's leadership will help move the region toward

resource-based planning that will make preserving vital drinking water resources the first requirement of any proposed development. The Sandusky/Erie County Community Foundation is compiling a Western Lake Erie Basin Watershed Evaluation using the Ohio EPA's "Guide to Developing Local Watershed Action Plans in Ohio."

We have moved beyond the environmental education type of grants into harder issues like land use planning, brownfield redevelopment, and pesticide management."

—Jane Moore, Program Officer, the Milwaukee Foundation

# Conclusion

Creating and building environmental endowments in community foundations is needed and is important. They can provide a focus for newly established community foundations, revive flagging community foundations, and strengthen existing community foundations' environmental efforts. In all cases, they raise the visibility of community foundations and can create or reinforce their image as convenor and facilitator. As importantly, community foundations can obtain new, local money for local environmental issues in a manner that positively involves several constituencies in a community.

For such collaborative projects to work, however, certain elements must be in place—elements which are the keys to success. These include:

- credibility with the participating community foundations, their staff and trustees; the public within the communities in which the participating community foundations operate; and the private foundations supporting the effort.
- leadership within the participating community foundations, be that staff, volunteers or trustees.
- support services that are personal, targeted to the needs of each participant, adaptive, and timely.

With these elements in place, successful collaborative projects on the environment are possible. The communities are ready for it and the environment needs it.

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