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Rooted in the business community, the Boise Future Foundation evolved into a tri-sector initiative: a public, private, and volunteer entity. Housed at a metropolitan university, the foundation examines critical community issues and informs public policy, debate, and action. This article presents the evolution of the foundation, highlights, critical accomplishments, and suggests important learning transferable to other settings.

The Case of the Boise Future Foundation, Inc.: An Evolving Trisector Initiative

The metropolitan centers of the American West are, in many ways, unique to the region. Issues of rapid growth, intense urbanization, economic diversification, globalization, gentrification, and quality of life define the “New West.” Resolution of these issues demands cross-sectional planning and multisectional cooperative action. For the past seven years, the Boise Future Foundation (BFF), consisting of a board of corporate, university, and governmental leaders, has served as a successful vehicle for using the intellectual resources of a metropolitan university to inform the city’s—and now regional—planning and development agenda. The following discussion traces the foundation’s evolution and serves to illuminate the successes and limitations of such cross-sectional, collaborative arrangements.

Pre-Foundation Review—Single-sector Interest

The origins of the BFF can be traced to solid corporate leadership. Over the formative years, the foundation idea was a single-sector notion of the business community. In January of 1979, John Fery, chairman and chief executive officer of Boise Cascade Corporation, in a speech to the annual gathering of the Greater Boise Area Chamber of Commerce, challenged the community to provide the necessary leadership and action to maintain the valued "community quality of life." His challenge included developing an objective definition of quality of life in the community, as well as measures of its components over time. Fery argued that the extent to which the community could maintain its quality of life would affect his ability to attract a better work force, which in turn would affect the bottom line of businesses in the community. The technological advancements that allowed a number of businesses to move to smaller communities in the last fifteen years, particularly in the west, have confirmed his premise.

Fery challenged both the chamber's membership and the greater community to use the concept of "carrying capacity" as a method of understanding the dynamics of urban growth. "Carrying capacity" encompasses an assessment of an area's natural resources and human systems, and attempts to determine the overall quality of life the area is able to maintain at varying population levels. For Boise, such a study would include an analysis of water supply, air quality, energy, transportation, public finance, and land use—with waste disposal as an underlying theme. Carrying capacity can be used to estimate the resulting margins for population growth and inform the potential choices in managing that growth. Beyond this, it provides the general citizenry with more information about the choices and greater opportunities for their participation in local governance.

Fery's challenge included a commitment of \$50,000 of corporate funds for the purpose of producing a carrying capacity study under the general direction of the Greater Boise Area Chamber of Commerce. The chamber did not have the academic/methodological expertise to conduct such a study, nor did other groups submitting proposals.

However, a summary work presented in early 1980 included a suggestion that "the chamber should establish a trust or foundation composed of Boise opinion leaders, including representatives of both business and government, to serve as a depository for the funds needed to pay for the study, to employ a director or institution to carry out the study, and to serve as custodian or disseminator for the carrying capacity

information on an ongoing basis.” The idea for BFF was born. But no other corporation came forward with additional dollars and the funding issue prohibited moving ahead.

Corporate/University Foundation to Deal With Community Issue

As the cost issues stymied the chamber, the debate regarding a carrying-capacity study and its role in community decisions continued. But through the leadership of then Boise State University (BSU) president, John Keiser, the BFF was created at BSU in 1991. His belief was that there was never a great city without a great university, and that Boise State was an appropriate place not only to house the foundation, but also to serve as the custodian and disseminator of carrying-capacity information.

The university committed resources in the form of staff and faculty time, space, student interns, and some soft dollars to make the project of a carrying-capacity study more cost effective. In addition, Boise State University provided a physical home for the foundation. The foundation's structure included 41 trustees, each of whom held educational, business, governmental, civic, or leadership positions in the community.

A director was hired to conceptualize the carrying-capacity study, while the executive committee identified the most critical issues to be examined, a series of studies to be conducted using “carrying capacity” as the common method of analysis. Staff, faculty, and students were then recruited to assist the director in conducting and completing the study.

Water supply and quality and air quality were the first issues examined. A Technical Assessment Committee (TAC) of recognized technical experts in their occupational fields from public, quasi-public, private, and nonprofit organizations oversaw each study. The study process alone resulted in a working vehicle for long neglected collaboration and conversation, and, in retrospect, the exchange of information and knowledge among the members of the TAC was an unexpected benefit and major contribution of the process. Further, members of the BFF Executive Committee, consisting of some of the most influential business and civic leaders in the community, were now being educated on issues about which they were only casually aware. Once a study was completed, it was widely disseminated, providing information, education, and discussion topics for the general public. All in all, the process and the studies

provided significant benefits to the community in general, to business leaders specifically, and to the university. Over time, a new respect developed for the faculty, staff, and students of the university, and, most important, the university was perceived as a major player in local issues that had once belonged only to local government and specialized groups.

Through 1994, the foundation conducted studies on air, water, transportation, energy, public services, land use, and education (K-12). It developed a “quality of life” survey instrument that was used every three to four years, and another inviting people to identify their “preferences for the future” on the basis of brief scenarios developed from the carrying capacity studies and other data collected by the foundation and other local organizations. During this period, the foundation’s studies directly inspired several public policy initiatives. For example, the Boise Future Foundation Air Quality Study led to the adoption of an air quality ordinance, and the water quality study influenced the passage of one on water quality. Taken together, the seven studies influenced the creation and content of a city-wide, strategic plan—the Boise Visions Project—that was instrumental in a downtown revitalization program.

In terms of funding, each year the foundation explained its work program to interested individuals and organizations interested in its work, and solicited contributions through letters from members of the executive committee. The corporate community and the university were the major sources of support. During a twelve-year period, the foundation collected more than \$350,000 in contributions for its programs, and the university added approximately \$100,000 in salaries, internships, and other soft monies. In addition, the foundation influenced public policy through research and education, and provided the university administration with a sense of mission and commitment to the community.

Since the creation of the foundation, the executive committee has engaged in a running debate on whether the foundation’s main role is “education” or “advocacy.” Due to the explosive growth that occurred in Boise, most particularly from 1986 to 1996, some argued that the foundation should serve as advocate for its reported recommendations. Others felt that the foundation was an educational/research organization with a mission to provide information and recommendations, but not to advocate for them—it was government’s responsibility, they argued, to implement those recommendations found appropriate.

Three-Sector Foundation

In the early 1990s, events changed the nature of the debate and of the foundation. Keiser left Boise State University in September of 1991, while Fery was preparing to retire from Boise Cascade; their departures left a significant gap in leadership of the foundation. Internal university issues consumed much of the interim BSU president's time, to the extent that a chairman of the executive committee elected a corporate member to preside over the foundation. Although these events reawakened a discussion about the need for and role of the foundation, the executive committee ultimately decided that the foundation had a place in the community and should continue, even without a home at the university.

The new mayor of Boise, Brent Coles, was added to the executive committee, and in that role formally asked for the foundation's help on the issue of growth management. Coles wanted the foundation to take an active role both in making recommendations and in supporting political actions to implement them.

A spirited discussion ensued among members of the executive committee once again. The old debate, however, was now recast by a new mayor with a compelling desire to find solutions to the negative effects of growth. Conversely, the foundation had been essentially created by the Chamber of Commerce, an organization that generally favors growth and viewed any kind of analysis of growth reluctantly.

The arrival of a new university president, the state's demand for a reduction in administrative costs, and the foundation's heightened interest in advocacy together sparked a new discussion about the foundation's future role with the university. The foundation's leadership remained with the corporate community, the staff moved to the mayor's office, and the foundation joined in a redefinition of the analyses of quality of life from the perspective of managed growth.

The executive committee was expanded to include political as well as corporate and university members. It raised funds and contracted with The Urban Land Institute (ULI) to bring a panel to the Boise region to examine growth management issues. The region consists of two counties and six primary cities, with Boise as the major economic and population center. The ULI's panel arrangement entailed bringing six to nine nationally known experts in to analyze a community issue over a five-day period. The panel then prepared a report of recommendations, leaving the community to implement them. The process was attractive to the foundation because it involved the perspective of outside eyes looking at the community and providing reasonably

unbiased opinions. In addition, the procedure involved many community organizations and members over time and could be compared to previous studies in terms of process and participation.

The executive committee also appointed a steering committee to provide guidance to the ULI panel. Its 30 members included business leaders, developers, neighborhood association representatives, mayors, council members, county commissioners, members of the chamber, and educators, not unlike the technical assistance committees of the past, except for being a bit larger and more broadly based. The mayor and university president served as co-chairs.

The foundation chair provided the leadership to raise the necessary funds, as in previous strategies. A solicitation letter signed by the executive committee again went out, but this time also went to the governmental agencies. Their inclusion proved important to the foundation: while previous studies had been useful to local governments, the latter were more participants than drivers and sometimes lacked motivation to contribute financially or followup on the recommendations.

At this point, foundation staff and the steering committee came from the mayor's office. The steering committee developed a list of issues for the panel to address during a visit, lists that were often complex for both the committee and ULI panel. Examples of the questions and issues that the steering committee developed follow:

- Information on how to properly manage economic and population growth, and the effects thereof, in ways that are sound economically, socially, and environmentally. That is, how do we implement a regional comprehensive plan to deal with growth management issues that protects the character or feel of the community(ies), but does not stifle economic vitality and job creation? In essence, can we have the best of both worlds? If so, how?
- Examination of decision-making processes and help in determining how 42 governments can efficiently and effectively deal with growth management issues. Is consolidation a mechanism?
- A comprehensive review of the public policy decision-making/ planning processes in place that most significantly affect the urban form, the quality of the urban environment, and growth management practices. How can the fractured planning processes be improved for the long-term benefit of the region?
- Advice on the issue of whether a community can or cannot

grow and maintain an economic level that is healthy? What about other communities—are there any that have not grown but have achieved a healthy economy? What has allowed them to do so?

Agreement on the panel questions was far-reaching, and their development was pivotal to the success of the ULI report. The university president was asked to facilitate the steering committee, which provided him with some early visibility to other leaders in the community. More to the point, the university was re-linked to the foundation.

The Urban Land Institute project of the Boise Future Foundation was a success, and brought people from different backgrounds together around a single set of issues. Since the study, the Chamber of Commerce has held follow-up “leadership” conferences on the issues raised in the ULI report, and local governments plan to discuss the issues of growth and the need for regional solutions. The community was given external reassurance that the region is much better off than perceived, and that the community is not just Boise, but the entire region. Thus what is done in one city will affect the quality of life in the others. This set the stage for the foundation’s future role.

The ULI project proved that the foundation model still worked—and perhaps had been improved upon—because its topic and approach arose from the sector most in need, the government. Even some other sectors that joined with a bit of reluctance were very supportive in the end. It would seem, therefore, that education and advocacy are not mutually exclusive if approached correctly.

Finally, Boise State University maintained its relevancy in the community as an active urban research institution, and it is following up on issues presented in the ULI report through both applied and theoretical projects. Moreover, by consensus, the foundation is now back at the university.

From Community to Region

The current agenda for the foundation involves another evolution and a new project. The foundation itself is changing its focus from a city to a regional agenda, and the executive committee is being reformulated to include the three sectors—business, education, and government—across several counties and municipalities. Leadership resides at the university, as do the positions of convener and coordinator. The budget is project-driven, with no permanent staff. The foundation can call upon the

intellectual resources of all three sectors to conduct needed studies, or it can raise funds to support a specific project. It is probable that the next project will focus on the financing of growth across a multicounty region.

What does the evolution of the BFF suggest about cross-sector collaboration? Several factors are germane. First, cross-sectional collaboration requires the appropriate sectors to be active participants from the beginning—research about or research to solve someone else's perceived problem is less than effective. The BFF experience in dealing with community issues from the perspectives of either the business or academic communities only may lead to much discussion but little activity. Similarly, funding from one sector to study or solve a problem found in another is unlikely to bring the desired results. Only when business, education, and government become full partners does significant progress result.

Flexibility and adaptability are necessary. The BFF has evolved over the past decade and should continue to do so in the years to come. Different issues demand different players and structure—the issues define the representatives, and the convening vehicle must allow for changes in leadership style and membership.

Finally, the university is the ideal convening ground for cross-sectional study and collaboration. Our processes are somewhere between those of the business community and those of public officials. Higher education can be viewed as neutral ground that can bring an ordered intellectual analysis to complex issues and problems. Conversely, participation in such activities serves to enrich and enhance the academic enterprise.