



# Opportunities for Leadership:

## Meeting Community Information Needs 2011

### Stories from the Knight Community Information Challenge

September 2011

Go to [informationneeds.org](http://informationneeds.org) to see videos of the profiled foundations





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## **Watch their Stories Online**

Hear more about the foundations' experience from the leaders and their community members. Go to [informationneeds.org](http://informationneeds.org) to see videos of the profiled foundations.

## Introduction

Community and place-based foundations are shifting from passive or reactive grant-maker to a role that is more catalytic. They are asking, “How do we take the leap into leadership and bring about transformation?” One way foundations are taking on this role is by connecting their work to the information needs in their communities.

Through the Knight Community Information Challenge (KCIC), Knight Foundation has committed \$24 million over five years to encourage community and place-based foundations to play a greater role in informing and engaging communities. Over the past three years, we have seen foundations of different sizes and geographic regions take a leadership role in using information to improve the lives of the populations they serve. Through their KCIC projects, foundations are using technology to create and support new news models, online information hubs, citizen journalism activities, youth media outlets, advocacy campaigns and civic engagement activities.

While there are many success stories to tell among the KCIC-funded foundations supporting information and media projects, we have chosen to highlight three that have taken distinct pathways beyond grant making, have experienced success and are in the process transforming the way they do their work. Our profiles tell the stories of why these foundations were motivated to incorporate information needs into their work, what they did to achieve their goals and what outcomes they have seen as a result. Across the three stories, the common expression of their work is the connection between information and community leadership.

## What We Learned

*Community and place-based foundations – uniquely positioned to be community **leaders** – used all of the assets at their disposal, including information and media, to **engage** in issues, thereby **transforming** their organizations to become more effective leaders and agents for community change.*

# Strengthening Foundation Leadership through Community Information

Foundations are uniquely positioned to use information to engage in community issues, thereby transforming their communities and strengthening their leadership

## Foundation Assets

Commitment to local issues  
A credible and independent voice  
Relationships across sectors  
Access to resources

## Leadership Activities in Information and Media



## Foundation Benefits

New insights about the community  
Greater visibility  
New, more productive relationships  
Improved digital media skills

## Community Outcomes

Progress on a community issue  
Increased availability of information  
Increased community engagement  
Stronger networks

## ***Why Community and Place-based Foundations***

Community and place-based foundations are uniquely positioned to use information for community change. As the three foundations we've profiled here demonstrate, their inherent assets and resources make their role as community leaders a natural fit for addressing community information needs. First and foremost, they are *committed to local issues*, whether it is inclusive community engagement in regional planning decisions, impact on the natural environment, government effectiveness and transparency, or any number of other urgent community needs. This commitment has led the foundations to use information among other tools to create greater impact. Community and place-based foundations are also deeply embedded in their communities and possess *relationships with diverse cross-sector stakeholders*, who view these foundations as *credible and trustworthy*. This social capital has helped generate the needed resources and expertise to address their communities' information needs. Using an *independent voice*, they treat information as a basis for community awareness, understanding and engagement, rather than using information to advocate for a specific point of view. Finally, in executing their projects, community and place-based foundations have *access to financial and non-financial resources*, and can successfully mobilize and leverage resources beyond their own in order to support their work.

## ***How Foundations Used Information to Engage Their Communities on Critical Issues***

Community and place-based foundations have applied several common practices to catalyzing or enhancing their community leadership. Each practice demonstrates the very active roles foundations can play beyond making grants. In order to implement their community information work successfully, they have *connected diverse stakeholders* by convening and facilitating collaborations, played a hands-on role in *creating new digital platforms*, *catalyzed new sources of community information*, of other funders and partners, and *built capacity* to use information internally and for their partners.

## ***How Foundations Have Transformed Themselves and Their Communities***

The foundations we highlight in this report have realized important and tangible benefits from the commitment they've made to improve their communities' access to news and information. Their projects have allowed them to gain *new insights* about their communities, increase the foundations' visibility, develop *new or more productive relationships* with other organizations, and *enhance the foundations' role* in creating community change. Most importantly, their information projects have enabled the foundations to influence important community issues. And, all three foundations have created more informed and engaged communities in ways that are consistent with the context and goals of their work. They have made *progress on complex and pressing community issues*, increased the *availability and use of community information* for a variety of audiences, increased *community engagement and action* around an issue of concern, and built *stronger networks* among community organizations.

## **Their Stories**

To help other community and place-based foundations understand how this work is accomplished, we offer three stories of community information leadership. Although there are many themes common to the three profiles, each foundation was motivated by a different issue or concern in their community:

***What does a foundation do when environmental issues are posing an immediate health threat to the community, and the 150 nonprofits that are there to help are not connected?***

The Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo (CFGB) is using information as a field-building tool for the Western New York environmental movement. With a “high touch and high tech” approach, the foundation has taken a leadership role in facilitating collaboration among 150 nonprofit organizations and a host of other community actors. Sharing information both online and offline has been critical to CFGB’s impact in the community. As the foundation’s CEO, Clotilde Perez-Bode Dedecker explains, “Community foundations used to be about connecting donors to needs. But today, with information technology, you can broaden that audience and increase scope and scale of impact. Community change work has taken us from arms-length experience of writing a check to a hands-on engagement for shaping the future of our communities, in partnership with our communities.” Inside the foundation, information has become a new way of doing business as well, impacting cross-functional teams, relationships with grantees and communications with external stakeholders.

***What does a foundation do when the local population is growing rapidly, and the community lacks a voice in decisions about how the region develops?***

Silicon Valley Community Foundation has long embraced its role as a community leader that engages residents to take action on key issues. In 2009, the community foundation experimented with an innovative way to bring more voices into the regional planning process using interactive digital technology. As a result, the foundation changed the way government and nonprofits engaged residents in the regional planning process. By connecting local, regional and statewide nonprofits, advocacy groups and government agencies, and developing digital tools to help residents and policymakers make more informed decisions, the community foundation has enhanced its own community leadership capacity and breathed fresh air into the engagement process. As CEO and president Emmett Carson explains, “The Knight Community Information Challenge has allowed us to get involved in regional planning in a way we had never envisioned before, and now we can’t imagine going forward without it.” Silicon Valley Community Foundation has further solidified its role as a strong convener and community leader by employing credible and actionable information to address a pressing community need.

**“The Knight Community Information Challenge has allowed us to get involved in regional planning in a way we had never envisioned before.”**

*Emmett Carson, President and CEO,  
Silicon Valley Community Foundation*

***What does a foundation do when the mainstream newspaper loses more than 25 percent of its staff, and no one is covering key community issues?***

The Community Foundation of New Jersey was concerned about the impact of the decline in journalistic media on statewide information available to residents. In 2009, the foundation decided to take a chance on a start-up online news project, *NJ Spotlight*, and in the process transformed itself into a new-media venture capitalist, providing a program-related investment to the organization.

This online news venture focused on state policy issues and has become a go-to source for New Jersey insiders as well as all readers interested in specific issues. By providing the risk capital to create this new source of information and mobilizing the resources of other place-based funders to support its success, the foundation has grown to become a leader in community information. Reflecting on the ongoing evolution of the news industry, foundation CEO Hans Dekker remarks, “There is a sea change in the way our nation is providing its journalism,” and he believes the Community Foundation of New Jersey should play a role in making sure residents get the state policy news they need.

## Leadership Profiles at a Glance

Foundation	Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo	Silicon Valley Community Foundation	Community Foundation of New Jersey
Asset Size	\$205 million	More than \$2 billion	\$230 million
Population Served	Approximately 2.5 million	Approximately 2.4 million	More than 8 million
KCIC Project	GrowWNY	YouChoose Bay Area	NJ Spotlight
KCIC Project Issue Focus	Environment	Regional Planning	Public Policy (Education, Health, Energy, State Budget)

In each profile, we explore the qualities and assets the foundations possess, the actions they are taking in using information as part of a social change effort and the transformations that the foundations and their communities have experienced. While each story is unique, they collectively embody lessons for other community and place-based foundations as they consider their path toward community information leadership.

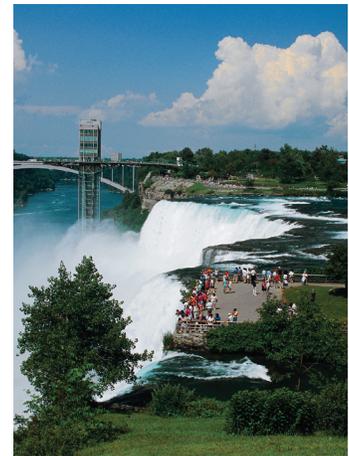
### Watch their Stories Online

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# How a Foundation Reinvented Itself for Community Change

## Growing the Western New York Environmental Movement

When Clotilde Dedecker joined the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo in 2006, she knew her leadership skills would be tested. The board wanted to play a more visible leadership role in the community and increase the relevance of one of the oldest community foundations in the country. Dedecker was regarded as a powerhouse – “an extraordinary leader who never has a slow moment,” says one board member – and yet, she approached the foundation’s first strategic plan by listening to community members’ stories and issues of concern in the Greater Buffalo area. One of the most compelling issues that surfaced during the listening tour was the need to create a healthier environment for all residents. By improving the natural environment, the Buffalo community would have a greater ability to reduce racial and ethnic disparities and increase educational, cultural and job opportunities.



Buffalo and its surrounding eight-county region are home to significant natural resources, including 20 percent of the world’s fresh water supply. But it also has a very serious environmental legacy because of its industrial heritage. Situated on Niagara Falls and the Great Lakes, Western New York was a major heavy industry and transit hub in the mid-20th century. In 1978, it was also declared home to the first U.S. Superfund site, at Love Canal, where toxic contamination from local industry had caused health problems among residents. Considered the birthplace of the environmental justice movement, the region three decades later continues to fight toxic contamination and a lack of green space, which have caused increased rates of asthma, obesity and heart disease in its residents.

Part of the problem has been that hundreds of organizations in the region have been working independently for decades to address these issues, and have struggled to make significant, far-reaching progress. When the foundation was developing its strategy four years ago, it saw an opportunity to make a difference on these issues. By catalyzing the formation of the Western New York Environmental Alliance and creating its online information hub, GrowWNY.org, to share information with and connect nonprofits and the general public, CFGB is ensuring that the region’s environmental leaders will work together more effectively and generate greater impact for the community. Since taking on this leadership role, Dedecker and her staff have also transformed the way the foundation does its work – integrating community information into the work they do, not only with the environment, but in affordable housing, education and poverty reduction.

## The Foundation Reinvents Itself as a Community Information Leader

Coming out of its strategic planning process in 2007, the foundation announced a major shift in its strategy. “We were good grant-makers,” Dedecker recalls, “but we were not using other potential tools in our toolbox [such as convening, capacity building and public awareness building]. We needed to step up to increase our impact in the community.” Dedecker saw information as a critical tool to help the foundation play a leadership role and fulfill its mission to connect people, ideas and resources to improve lives in their community. She saw that their work could be enhanced through the use of information technology. “When you take good information, you aggregate it and you share it, you get better results.”

In October 2008, the foundation facilitated the region’s first Environmental Congress to help organizations start working together around shared interests. They expected about 60 regional organizations to participate. Instead, representatives from 150 groups showed up. Some were large, well-established nonprofits; others were small, grassroots advocacy groups; many were virtually unknown to the foundation. Their missions ranged from advocating for the responsible clean-up of dirty power plants, to protecting the biodiversity of the region’s park systems, to providing young people with more opportunities to access and steward the natural environment. As one attendee, Larry Brooks from Buffalo Niagara Riverkeeper, described, “Each of us had our heads down, blinders up, focused on our own work, and we weren’t talking to each other very much. So it was fragmented, until the community foundation got us talking and created this central hub where all things connected.” As more conversations took place, the organizations began to collaborate more, set a strategic direction and attract collective funding. Out of that work, the Alliance identified the need to support ongoing information sharing among the organizations. With the foundation’s commitment to lead this effort, they created GrowWNY.org (Green Renaissance of WNY).

The goals of GrowWNY.org were twofold: to connect the region’s environmental nonprofits by sharing information about their work with one another, and to make information about the environment more accessible and actionable for residents. CFGB’s staff and board committed to leading the process of creating and launching GrowWNY.org because they knew that it would help the environmental movement be more effective. Although the foundation had never used information technology for social change prior to the GrowWNY project, CFGB’s board knew the foundation’s involvement was consistent with its role as a community leader. Board chair Alphonso O’Neil-White explained,

*“Part of being a leader is bringing people together – in any context – to share information.  
... If we can create the context for sharing information, we can generate action.”*

## Using Information to Build a Movement

When the foundation received its Knight Community Information Challenge grant, CFGB's leadership work went into hyper-drive. "We had never been focused on promoting good information on both sides of an issue so that better decisions could be made. We also hadn't tried to change citizen behavior," said Dedecker. "This project was an opportunity to try new things." Through information, the foundation demonstrated its leadership role for the Buffalo and Western New York regions in two key ways:

- Creating a digital platform to support the strategic priorities of its partners.
- Building the foundation's internal capacity – and the capacity of its nonprofit partners – to ensure the effective use of information and technology.

### *Creating a digital platform to support the strategic priorities of its partners*

CFGB has played a hands-on role in supporting the strategic direction of the Western New York Environmental Alliance. During the website's design phase, the foundation played an important role by working closely with nonprofit partners to ensure that their needs were met, as well as pushing for features that would make important environmental issues more accessible to mainstream residents. The foundation saw the creation of GrowWNY.org as a clear opportunity to ensure that the collaborative work of the Alliance could continue and that members' capacity to engage community audiences was increased.

**"GrowWNY is the glue that helps the Alliance do all the other work we need to do."**

*Erin Heaney, Executive Director  
Clean Air Coalition of Western New York*

Now that the website has launched, GrowWNY is an important communications and information vehicle that helps the Alliance maintain a stronger network. "GrowWNY is the glue that helps the Alliance do all the other work we need to do," explains Erin Heaney, Executive Director of the Clean Air Coalition of Western New York, one of the 150 nonprofit partners in the network. In addition, the website is helping to increase access to information about environmental issues for the area's residents. In order to reach a more mainstream audience, the site itself is organized to be accessible to, and encourage action among, residents. It is rich with interactive features, such as the *Go Outside Map* of outdoor activities, the *What's My Footprint? Calculator*, and a *community events calendar*. Information related to key issue areas, such as Food and Agriculture or Energy and climate, are easy to find on the site as well.

### *Building internal capacity – and the capacity of nonprofit partners – to ensure the effective use of information and technology*

Dedecker describes the foundation's leadership role in the Western New York environmental movement as "high touch and high tech," combining in-person meetings and decision-making with online information sharing and communications; "High touch" was something that came very naturally to all of us. But "high-tech" was not as natural." In order to build a great platform with engaging content, the foundation had to increase its capacity and the capacity of its nonprofit partners to use information technology effectively.

To build the foundation's own capacity, they hired web designers Free Range Studios, who were well known for their mission-driven services and helped to educate the foundation about this new area of communications. They also increased and reallocated staff resources to manage the website and conduct community outreach, such as setting up tables at farmers markets to raise awareness about GrowWNY's information resources.

To build the capability of their partners to use GrowWNY, CFGB provided training and equipment, such as flip cams, to make it easy for time-constrained staff to produce content for the site. They also sought additional funding from other foundations to make the project a reality. As Alliance partner Robert Shibley said, "Long after they're done talking about how much money can come from the foundation, they're engaging other entities – municipal government and other funders – to see where else they can get together the necessary resources and support." The foundation and its partners have successfully leveraged more than \$1.6 million in the past four years from CFGB donors, Knight Foundation, and state and federal grants to support their collective environmental goals.

## Lessons in Leadership: Transformation in Buffalo and at the Foundation

Now that GrowWNY is up and running, the foundation's nonprofit partners are changing the way that they engage each other and their constituents. Nonprofits large and small are shifting from an analog to a digital communications strategy that is more relevant for today's audience. They are using the site to post event notices and news about issues they are working on, and they are experimenting with digital media to get the word out to an increasingly tech-savvy audience.

Nonprofits are also sharing information with each other's audiences, organizing community events together, approaching policy issues collaboratively and aligning strategies. This new coordination has created opportunities for nonprofits to think big. As Zoe Hollomon of the Massachusetts Avenue Project, a nonprofit partner, said, "We're trying to speak beyond our regular constituent group to groups and individuals who have never been involved. It feels like there is new momentum." In the community, a small but growing number of residents are accessing information online, from approximately 600 weekly unique visitors in February 2011 to more than 750 weekly visitors in June 2011.

As the foundation has gotten deeper into this work, it has found new opportunities to use information to play a more visible role in the community. For example, when the City of Buffalo sought community stakeholder perspectives to inform the city's new zoning codes, they went to CFGB and GrowWNY first. For the Foundation, it was a new opportunity for leadership as their stakeholders helped to shape the city's sustainable land use plan, known as the Green Code. Justin Booth of Green Options Buffalo says, "Without the foundation's leadership, I don't think the environmental community would have had such a prominent voice at the table throughout the ongoing process to develop a new land-use plan and zoning code." And through its Green and Healthy Homes Initiative, the foundation is playing a crucial intermediary role to integrate city and county public services. With support from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, CFGB spearheaded a lead poisoning prevention and awareness campaign targeted at low-income families living in older homes. Now more than 200 homes are lead free and safer for young children, adults have been trained and placed in green jobs that will make their neighborhoods healthier, and thousands of residents are more aware of safety hazards and the abatement programs that combat them.

CFGB has described its experience as transformative.

*“We have been catapulted into the 21st century because of this work. Sometimes I think about how far behind we would be if we hadn’t decided to do this,” said vice president for programs Cara Matteliano.*

And in the process, the foundation has successfully adapted its work internally to be a more effective community information leader by:

- **Integrating communications into program activities.** Previously, the communications function was used primarily for donor engagement, but as more of the foundation’s key initiatives incorporated information, this specialized expertise added significantly to CFGB’s program capacity.
- **Creating new expectations for grantees.** Today, the foundation requires all grantees in their environment program to contribute to the GrowWNY website. Funded projects are expected to incorporate web and social media into their plans for reaching and engaging their target audiences.
- **Incorporating new communications tools** into its public-facing marketing and communications repertoire, using video and social media more readily to reach their constituents.

The foundation’s transformation has been nearly as dramatic as the impact it has had on the Buffalo community, with more, surely, to come. “This project has transformed the way the foundation approaches its community change work,” says Dedecker.

## Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo

**Asset Size:**

\$205 million

**Demographic Reach:**

Approximately 2.5 million residents in the eight-county Western New York/Greater Buffalo region

**KCIC Award:**

\$188,000 in 2009, \$133,000 in 2011

**Website:**

GrowWNY.org

**Project Description:**

GrowWNY.org is an online information hub that provides information on a wide range of topics related to the region's environmental issues. GrowWNY helps residents become more informed and engaged; they can learn more about how to personally "green" their lives and positively impact the environment or inspire policy changes among public and private decision makers in the region. For member nonprofits, GrowWNY.org supports knowledge sharing and collective action on priority areas of interest. The website also helps nonprofits communicate more effectively to a broader audience. It serves as the information vehicle for the broader strategic efforts of the Western New York Environmental Alliance.

**Growth in average monthly unique visitors to GrowWNY.org, February – June 2011:**

25 percent

# How a Catalytic Foundation Solidified Its Community Leadership

## Using Information to Improve Civic Engagement

On May 24, 2011, Erica Wood, vice president of community leadership and grant making at Silicon Valley Community Foundation, stood in front of a crowd of more than 100 participants at a public regional planning forum in Oakland, Calif., to discuss how San Francisco Bay Area residents might address the influx of an estimated 2 million new people into the nine-county region during the next 25 years. Where these people might live, work, shop and find entertainment was anticipated to have a significant impact on issues ranging from air pollution and noise to the availability of safe and affordable housing and parking.

In an effort to inspire greater civic participation in the regional planning process, the community foundation partnered with nonprofit and government agencies to create a community information initiative called YouChoose Bay Area. YouChoose aims to help residents and community leaders make informed decisions about the building development and population growth that will shape the environment, economy and long-term health of communities throughout the San Francisco Bay Area. The initiative has been centered on an interactive online platform that publishes region-specific information about Bay Area communities and hosts a suite of interactive exercises that allows visitors to choose regional development options and see the results of their choices if those options were adopted across the region. For instance, a user could prioritize things they value such as “big house with a yard” or “public transit within walking distance,” and receive a report on what the region’s overall development would look like and the impact those choices would have on other factors such as clean air or affordable housing. The YouChoose initiative also encompasses a range of offline engagement opportunities, including the forum in Oakland and five public discussions in other counties throughout the region.

Judging from the mix of civic leaders, real estate developers and business owners participating in the forums, the community foundation and its partners were successful in attracting new faces and perspectives into the conversation. The community foundation combined innovative digital technology and public forums to put community back at the center of the regional planning process. YouChoose demonstrated a new model for how the community foundation could approach its community information and civic engagement efforts.



## Envisioning a Stronger Community Leadership Role

The community foundation is nestled in the heart of the Bay Area, and is a short drive to the campuses of companies like Google, Facebook and Apple. The highly successful businesses located in Silicon Valley have fueled dramatic economic growth in the region, yet the community has struggled to accommodate the growing workforce with adequate housing and public services. Silicon Valley's transit and housing infrastructure are among the lowest ranked in the Bay Area.

Silicon Valley Community Foundation was created as the result of a 2007 merger between two community foundations serving Santa Clara and San Mateo counties. The merger created a blank slate for the community foundation's program strategy. When convening community leaders to discuss the critical issues that the community foundation should address, CEO and president Emmett Carson recognized the opportunity to use the community foundation's resources to inform how the region would grow over the next 15 to 20 years. As a result, the staff began learning more about the regional-planning landscape and building relationships with local and regional stakeholders working on regional planning and land use issues in Santa Clara and San Mateo counties.

Soon groundbreaking legislation was passed in California in 2008 (SB 375) requiring all regions to develop a "Sustainable Communities Strategy," and the community foundation seized the opportunity to turn a regional planning process run largely by insiders into a broader community engagement effort. The community foundation was well positioned to be a leader in this effort. Its understanding of the issues, relationships with key players and reputation as a strong, politically neutral leader meant that it could influence the planning process in a way that was different from advocacy organizations or government agencies. The community foundation's credibility and objectivity also proved to be one of its most critical assets. "We are not advocating for one particular set of solutions or resolutions to a problem," says community leadership officer Margot Rawlins. "We were able to get the regional planning agencies involved because they perceived we have the ability to bring people in that had a variety of perspectives, not just one point of view."

## The Genesis of YouChoose Bay Area

In order to equip policy makers and the public with information to make better regional planning decisions, YouChoose emphasizes three activities: 1) connecting nonprofit, for-profit and government stakeholders through an advisory committee, 2) engaging the public through regional planning forums and 3) educating people through theYouChooseBayArea.org website, which hosts the interactive online tool. At the regional planning forums, participants used the tool to discuss what they value most about their communities – clean air, safe roads, jobs – and learned how that might be affected by four different scenarios for growth.

Stuart Cohen, executive director of the advocacy organization TransFormCA, provided the inspiration for what ultimately became YouChoose. Cohen was frustrated that planning discussions often reached only a small group of "insiders" – mostly city staff and elected officials. He believed the community foundation could help develop a state-of-the-art online, interactive platform specific to Bay Area needs that would engage individuals in conversations about growth. He believed the way to capture attention was to focus on what residents most valued – clean air, walkability, access to jobs – rather than simply publish a list of complicated planning scenarios.

## YouChooseBayArea.org Website

Envision Bay Area: A Silicon Valley Community Foundation initiative [View introduction / help video](#)

**1 Your Challenge** How would you plan for growth in the Bay Area?

**CHALLENGE**

**YouChoose Bay Area**  
Your home, your future, your choice

Slide 2 of 5  
The cars and trucks we drive account for almost 40% of our greenhouse gas emissions today; how will further growth impact our climate?  
read below for more info

**2 PRIORITIES** **3 CHOICES** **4 OUTCOMES** **5 GET INVOLVED**

**About Your Challenge** ⓘ When you have read enough information, click PRIORITIES to begin. [Send Feedback](#) [Share: f t e +](#)

Envision Bay Area: A Silicon Valley Community Foundation initiative [View introduction / help video](#)

**3 Make Choices** What combination will best match your priorities?

**CHALLENGE** **2 PRIORITIES** **CHOICES** **4 OUTCOMES** **5 GET INVOLVED**

**Where Do We Build?**  
Where should we locate new homes to accommodate future growth?

**How Will We Grow?**  
Within the Bay Area, how should new development occur?

**2 Keep Homes Here**  
I want people to be closer to their jobs and reduce the number of new in-commuters by accommodating all projected housing growth within the Bay Area.

**C More Urban**  
I want the majority of development to be focused around transit and in walkable neighborhoods, with more money spent on transit, walking and bicycle facilities.

**Where Do We Build?**  
 Export New Homes 1  
 Keep Homes Here 2

**How Will We Grow?**  
 Business as Usual A  
 Planned Future B  
 More Urban C  
 Most Urban D

[random](#)

**About these Choices** ⓘ After selecting a combination of choices, click OUTCOMES. [Send Feedback](#) [Share: f t e +](#)

YouChooseBayArea.org contains important information about the impact of growth on issues such as clean air, walkability and job transit; it then allows visitors to “make choices” about various development scenarios to understand how policy choices would affect those issues in the future.

Around the same time that Cohen was envisioning this type of online tool, leaders at Silicon Valley Community Foundation were exploring how they could play a more transformative leadership role in the community. After asking local nonprofit leaders, “What needs can the foundation address with its leadership?” Margot Rawlins heard from nonprofits that informing the public about sustainable growth was a critical issue for the region. Soon the community foundation, and key partners Greenbelt Alliance, TransForm and Calthorpe Associates had joined forces to develop a tool to inform and engage Bay Area residents around regional growth and planning.

## How Information Enhances Community Leadership Opportunities

Silicon Valley Community Foundation believes in being a catalytic community leader, rather than relying on its grant making alone to solve complex problems. By expanding its offerings to include information sharing, the foundation identified an opportunity to leverage and expand its community leadership in two important ways:

- Using digital platforms to engage communities through new media
- Connecting diverse stakeholders to take collective action

### *Using Digital Platforms to Engage Communities through New Media*

*“Good information is a cornerstone of civic engagement at its best,” Carson asserts.*

Yet for information to become actionable it must be communicated in a way that is easy to understand and relevant to people’s lives. This is at the heart of YouChoose: transforming the complex regional planning dialogue into a more accessible conversation that people could have with a friend or neighbor. The community foundation helped develop a digital platform that could translate dense statistics about issues such as household energy consumption, carbon emissions and vehicle miles traveled into information that people understand and want to share with others.

By translating complex qualitative concepts and dense quantitative data into more straightforward, visually appealing and actionable information, the community foundation and its partners have discovered new ways to engage communities. The platform is not just a dynamic online tool; it is also being used to transform the process of community engagement. With a few clicks of a mouse or pushes on a keypad, residents can see quickly how their desire for “less local traffic” could affect the quality of the air or the length of their commutes. Although outreach has been focused on increasing attendance at the community forums, the YouChooseBayArea.org website has already attracted more than 4,200 unique visitors since its launch in March 2011.

Silicon Valley Community Foundation seized the YouChoose tool as a way to reinvent their approach to community process. Its work has garnered the attention of other organizations, including the American Lung Association of California, which is planning to use YouChoose to show physicians, medical professionals and public health advocates how decisions about transit and housing can affect people’s health.

### *Connecting Diverse Stakeholders to Take Collective Action*

Convening advocacy groups, government officials and private sector partners together at one table is no easy task. Regional planning agencies such as the Metropolitan Transit Commission and the Association of Bay Area Governments have ultimate responsibility for designing and implementing a sustainable regional plan by 2012. Although the community foundation did not have a strong relationship with those agencies prior to YouChoose, the agencies have since been invited to serve on the advisory committee because of their credibility in the community and their role in the development of a regional plan for growth. YouChoose partners agree that without the community foundation’s active involvement, government agencies would not have been able to reach such a broad spectrum of diverse populations and organizations.

The regional planning agencies were so impressed with the work of the Community Foundation and its partners that they eventually adopted YouChoose as a central component of the public planning forums. According to Miriam Chion, a senior planner with the Association of Bay Area Governments, “The YouChoose tool allowed us to convey complex concepts to residents of 100 different cities with 100 different lifestyles, which was no small task.”

Jeremy Madsen, executive director of lead partner Greenbelt Alliance, describes the collaborative leadership of the community foundation like this: “Other foundations write a check, but expect us to do the work and report back. Silicon Valley is a collaborator in the work, taking advantage of our unique strengths, rather than allowing our differences to create a wall between us.” Rawlins and her staff are proactive in building relationships and bringing information to bear both in large groups and behind the scenes to create the conditions for change.

**“We bring people together because we’ve identified a problem and want to identify solutions.”**

*Emmett Carson, President and CEO,  
Silicon Valley Community Foundation*

The community foundation cares about the issue of regional planning, but does not advocate a particular stance on how to get there. “We didn’t get into regional planning because we’re neutral about the outcomes,” explains Carson. “We bring people together because we’ve identified a problem and want to identify solutions.” Silicon Valley Community Foundation plays a critical role in connecting the diverse groups that have different agendas so that informed decisions can be made. Bringing a trusted reputation and credible information to bear is absolutely essential to creating an environment where collective, concerted action can take place.

### ***Lessons for Leadership: Foundation and Community Transformation***

Silicon Valley Community Foundation’s role as an information provider is embedded into its DNA. Information is an essential ingredient in its community engagement efforts. However, through linking information with leadership, the community foundation has developed new partnerships with government agencies, nonprofits and even schools that allow it to reach even more residents. The community foundation has also identified a new tool for community engagement: digital platforms. By introducing an online platform to offline community meetings, Silicon Valley Community Foundation was able to make information actionable and engaging.

The community foundation’s leadership also created conditions for meaningful community change. New perspectives were captured in the regional planning process. “Using information, we got citizens to think differently about the interplay between housing, transportation and jobs,” says Carson. More than 15 percent of the 800 residents participating in the 10 community workshops were attending a regional planning meeting for the first time. “It was exciting to see people from very different points of view interacting with each other in the workshops. That’s democracy in action,” explains Rawlins.

Their ability to build bridges did not manifest itself only in public forums, but also behind the scenes. In both cases, the community foundation’s leadership in bringing credible information to bear helped organizations agree on a common direction. As a result, government agencies are now using more credible and accurate numbers in forecasting job growth, which has the potential for lasting impact.

Silicon Valley Community Foundation took advantage of its sophisticated new online tool, substantial knowledge about the issues and experience facilitating community-wide dialogue to expand its leadership from two counties to nine. Its ability to bring together multiple stakeholders and effectively solicit and capture opposing voices has further solidified Silicon Valley Community Foundation’s leadership in using information to address pressing community issues.

## Silicon Valley Community Foundation

**Asset Size:**

\$2 billion

**Demographic Reach:**

Approximately 2.4 million, in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties

**KCIC Award:**

\$302,000 in 2009

**Website:**

[youchoosebayarea.org](http://youchoosebayarea.org)

**Project Description:**

YouChoose Bay Area is strategic initiative led by the Silicon Valley Community Foundation to strengthen the ability of residents and community leaders to make informed decisions about the building and growth that will shape the future environment, economy and everyday life of Bay Area communities. The initiative integrates three primary activities: convening key stakeholders through an advisory committee, developing an online, interactive tool, and engaging communities in workshops through the regional planning process. The interactive, web-based tool visualizes and quantifies the links between growth and the things that residents care deeply about, such as open-space preservation, clean air, water consumption, public health, energy use, affordable housing, greenhouse gas emissions and access to mass transit. Regional planning forums use the tool by integrating the technology into real-time presentations and audience feedback, to capture and synthesize the voice of the community in a more actionable way.

**Number of unique participants in 10 community workshops:**

800

# How a Foundation Went from Arms-Length to Hands-On

## Shining a Spotlight on New Jersey

In July 2008, New Jersey's largest newspaper, The Star-Ledger in Newark, announced that it was forcing the early retirement of more than 25 percent of its staff to avoid selling the paper. Many of the 150 staff members who accepted the buyouts were respected, experienced journalists. At the Statehouse in Trenton, the press corps had collapsed over the previous decade from 50 to just 20. As the Community Foundation of New Jersey's CEO Hans Dekker recalls, "They got rid of the education, environment and healthcare beats – issues that we cared about because they're important to the health of our communities."

The Community Foundation of New Jersey (CFNJ) board believed that the state's residents were lacking information about the state's most important public policy issues, and opportunities to engage on local decision-making. As then-foundation board member Ingrid Reed explained, "Communities really did not have access to information that would help them to understand the problems that they were facing and the solutions that they might craft. [We] needed some way for people to understand what was happening in Trenton and connect that to issues that affected their lives."

**"Communities really did not have access to information that would help them to understand the problems that they were facing and the solutions that they might craft. [We] needed some way for people to understand what was happening in Trenton and connect that to issues that affected their lives."**

*Ingrid Reed, Former Board Member  
Community Foundation of New Jersey*

In response to this challenge, the foundation made a program-related loan in the fall of 2009 to a small team of journalists who were proposing to start NJ Spotlight, a new online investigative news service focused on state policy issues. The foundation ultimately established a partnership with the group, becoming the site's most significant investor and playing a founding role in the start-up and development of the enterprise. In the process, the community foundation shifted its role from that of a traditional grant-maker to a proactive partner and community leader addressing the community information and news challenges of the state of New Jersey.

## Rolling Up Their Sleeves

The Community Foundation of New Jersey is located in Morristown, near Newark and the greater New York City metropolitan area. It is also little more than an hour's drive north of the state capital, Trenton, and the greater Philadelphia metro area.

This mid-sized foundation had managed several donor-advised funds directed toward an array of community issues, including education and youth, health and social services. In a typical year, the foundation awarded less than \$1 million in unrestricted grants. Its CEO Hans Dekker joined the

Foundation in 2003 and described its role in the community as, “a bit behind the scenes. We like to think of ourselves as the mortar and the nonprofits that we fund as the bricks.” Before 2009, CFNJ had not made grants to any media projects.

**“Our board was very passionate about this work. They realized that if we don’t fill this void, no one will.”**

*Hans Dekker, CEO  
The Community Foundation of New Jersey*

When The Star-Ledger announced its extensive staff cuts in 2008, the foundation recognized the move as symptomatic of the larger trend in mainstream media and predicted that few (if any) institutions could effectively step in and provide new

platforms for in-depth journalism. CFNJ board members supported a proposal to fund NJ Spotlight as a first step in addressing the rising news and information challenge in their community. They agreed. “Our board was very passionate about this work. They realized that if we don’t fill this void, no one will,” said Dekker.

The foundation and the NJ Spotlight team moved quickly to apply for a Knight Community Information Challenge grant. The project won the award, and they began to put the pieces in place. Although this was a new venture, they had a few insights on how to do this. Board member Ingrid Reed had run the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers and was very knowledgeable about the media landscape in New Jersey and activities in the Statehouse. And Hans Dekker was known as a smart, patient and persistent leader who also understood the policy arena. With this expertise, the foundation adopted a more hands-on role – much like a venture capitalist, but in a community information context – and this has put the foundation on the path of philanthropic leadership.

## Taking an Active Role in Community Information Leadership

When two respected reporters who had taken The Star-Ledger’s buyout, John Mooney and Dusty McNichol, approached Dekker with an interesting idea for a new online news service focused on state policy issues, opportunity turned into action. Dekker and the foundation board saw a chance to invest in an entrepreneurial venture – with all of the associated responsibility and risks. They were encouraged to take the leap in part by the potential to leverage the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation’s influence and funding through the Community Information Challenge.

NJ Spotlight founding editor John Mooney was not your typical nonprofit leader. He would be the first to say that he knew nothing about running a nonprofit before he launched NJ Spotlight. He knew a lot, however, about education in New Jersey. According to key people in the state, he was recognized as a credible, trustworthy reporter. “I got to know John when he was still at The Star-Ledger. He struck me as knowledgeable about education and not just looking for the sound bite; he’d ask questions indicating he knew more than the superficial issues,” says Mila Jasey, State Assembly member for the 27th District. Likewise, Mooney’s friend and NJ Spotlight colleague, Tom Johnson, had extensive experience reporting on energy and the environment in a state with some of the country’s most aggressive policy incentives to promote clean tech and solar businesses. Their credibility was essential to launching NJ Spotlight.

Importantly, the foundation – and Dekker in particular – pushed the NJ Spotlight team to come up with a thoroughly vetted business plan, and the foundation funded the planning process before underwriting the website launch. The foundation’s support allowed Mooney to hire Lee Keough, who had served as a successful managing editor of a long-lived online magazine. They, in turn, hired Kevin Harold, an experienced magazine publishing executive who had managed business development and understood how to attract ongoing sources of earned revenue. “Having the right people with a level of trust, we were able to hit the ground running. Starting from scratch with a new reporter would have been really difficult,” says Mooney. This start-up idea had become a serious venture led by an online news dream team.



On May 5, 2010, NJ Spotlight launched its website with Mooney and Johnson reporting from Trenton. With a live product to show to other potential investors, the community foundation and NJ Spotlight started to attract additional funding and grow their audience. The William Penn Foundation and The Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation committed to supporting the enterprise. Kevin Harold started developing the site’s earned revenue streams, contacting corporate sponsors and advertisers. NJ Spotlight enlisted a host of media partners, including WHYY, Philly.com and even The Star-Ledger, which agreed to distribute Spotlight articles to their audiences. To reach the broader community offline, they also launched a revenue-generating series of in-person roundtables hosted in towns across the state on issues such as education and energy, enlisting well-known panelists representing different sides of the issues.

Since NJ Spotlight’s launch, CFNJ has learned that taking a leadership role in investing in information is a very different experience from more traditional grant making. It also turns out that, for CFNJ, investing significantly in NJ Spotlight didn’t mean exerting editorial control. Dekker confesses that the foundation didn’t have a clear understanding of this at first. “We had to learn about the firewall between editorial concerns and the business side. We view our job as setting the general direction on which policy issues should get covered. But we are disciplined about staying out of what gets covered day-to-day.” NJ Spotlight has also been transparent about its sources of funding and maintains that clarity with prospective funders.

## How Foundation Leadership Supports Community Information

CFNJ believes its support of NJ Spotlight is consistent with the foundation’s overall strategy and mission. Just as Dekker described the foundation as the mortar for community nonprofits, he also says that journalism and civic engagement are “the mortar that holds up communities and democracy.” At the same time, this community information project reflects a distinct change in the way the foundation does business and a shift in the role of information in supporting the foundation’s leadership through the following activities:

- Catalyzing new sources of information through hands-on engagement
- Mobilizing resources of other place-based funders to support information

## ***Catalyzing new sources of information through hands-on engagement***

The foundation made a decision early on that this relationship would be more than just writing a check.

*“This has not been an ‘arms-length,’ type of grant. We took an ownership stake in this project. If it breaks, it will be on our watch,” says Dekker.*

Ingrid Reed joined NJ Spotlight’s board. The foundation’s financial investment was structured as a program-related loan. If it turns out that NJ Spotlight succeeds in attracting sustainable sources of funding, the foundation will get its money back. As Mooney says, “We all own it together, which is wonderful.”

Even as they committed to Mooney’s and his colleagues’ experiment, they knew it would be a challenge to successfully launch an alternative business model in a failing industry. “We wanted to think about this in a venture capital way – and to think about sustainability at the very beginning,” says Reed.

The need to achieve financial sustainability has been quite real. The CFNJ board set the expectation that their investment in seeding the start-up of NJ Spotlight would not last forever. Kevin Harold, NJ Spotlight’s publisher, who has 30 years of experience in the publishing industry, described the community foundation as a venture capitalist in the traditional model of business. “In a sense, they’re fronting the start-up money. Their motives are different, but the functionality is pretty much the same. I suspect it’s a much different role for the foundation,” says Harold. “It’s been a learning curve for both of us – in crafting a new business model.” The NJ Spotlight team reports quarterly to the foundation’s board, just as they would if they were at a for-profit newspaper with traditional investors. “They want to hear sustainability, period,” Hans Dekker says of his board.

## ***Mobilizing resources of other place-based funders to support information***

Because their investment involves a significant amount of the foundation’s resources, “we’ve attracted significant partners, and we would like it to succeed,” says Dekker. “We’re worried about sustainability in a way that we wouldn’t be with a smaller grant relationship.” CFNJ’s own commitment of seed funding, in combination with Dekker’s credibility as a respected executive director and collaborator, has made it easy for other funders to say yes. The first major outside support came from the Knight Community Information Challenge. The foundation has since attracted additional funding from The Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, William Penn Foundation and a host of event sponsors and ad buyers. They were able to do so because, by addressing core issues at the policy level in the Statehouse, NJ Spotlight made its success highly relevant to every foundation leader. The community foundation and other philanthropic supporters could hardly argue that these issues are not of importance to their constituents as well. The NJ Spotlight staff and the foundation are placing bets that other foundations and corporations will start to put their support behind continued coverage of specific beats.

## Lessons in Leadership: Transformation in New Jersey

Disseminating community information is an important step in influencing state policy. NJ Spotlight was quick to move in this direction. According to William Penn Foundation's Shawn McCaney, "Within the first week of opening their doors, NJ Spotlight exposed New Jersey's largest utility company for nonpayment of millions in mandatory societal benefits charges, reaching back more than a decade, resulting in key legislators calling for the state's attorney general to investigate. That was a pretty good signal that NJ Spotlight would be a new and influential voice for New Jersey media." Elected officials, school board members, government administrators and interest groups such as the League of Women Voters and the New Jersey Education Association are their most frequent readers, and their numbers are growing monthly as word spreads about NJ Spotlight's reporting.

More than a year in to the enterprise, the community foundation is excited about the unique role NJ Spotlight plays in New Jersey's media landscape. Leaders such as Mila Jasey believe in its value. "I hope the Spotlight has a future. It's filling a void," she said. "There's a real interest out there. People really do want to understand issues. And there are not a lot of places to go for that kind of in-depth information." Particularly for audience members who are interested in specific beats, NJ Spotlight has become a credible go-to source.

Other New Jersey media have taken notice as well. In addition to its existing partnerships, NJ Spotlight has entered into formal content-sharing agreements with some of the largest public media organizations in the region, if not the country. They include WNYC Public Radio and WNET Television, both of which have signed deals to take over public media in New Jersey.

**"This is a sea change in the way our nation is providing its journalism."**

*John Mooney, Founding Editor  
NJ Spotlight*

While NJ Spotlight is successfully increasing the availability of news on New Jersey state policy, doing so in a sustainable way is still challenging. John Mooney believes attaining that goal is going to need patient capital. "It's going to take a few years. And hopefully the window (of funding) will stay open long enough to do that." Hans Dekker agrees, "This is a sea change in the way our nation is providing its journalism. To think that three years of seed funding, and the market will have righted itself and this effort will be sustainable, I'm not sure that's realistic."

Through their experience with NJ Spotlight, the Community Foundation of New Jersey has been transformed from grant-maker to community information leader. Reflecting on the community foundation's role to date, Ingrid Reed said, "You need to have a vision. You need to be clear that you probably can't do it all. You've got to figure out how to partner and trust them. But you still have to hold them accountable and find other revenue sources. We've worked very hard to do that on the journalism side and the support side."

Investing in community information has also had ancillary benefits for other foundation investors. William Penn Foundation, for example, cares about environmental issues that affect the southern New Jersey region and believes media grant making is a great way to see impact. As McCaney explained, "The nice thing about our media work from a grant-maker's perspective is that we can see what they're reporting every day. It's not like traditional grant making, where your grantees go off and do their work and report back to you six or twelve months later."

More broadly, NJ Spotlight supporters at The Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation observe that foundations have an important role to play at this moment of transition in the journalism industry. CEO Chris Daggett says, “Foundations are able to take risks that others in our society often can’t financially afford. Given the state of media in New Jersey, it’s important to do.” In order to ensure civic engagement and the success of democracy, foundations should consider the relationship between their work and the media. “We need to do everything we can to ensure robust media not only in New Jersey, but also nationwide.” And even as information providers are caught in a moment of transition for community information and media, foundation leaders can feel assured that they have made important contributions in catalyzing new sources of information so that communities can be more informed.

## Community Foundation of New Jersey

**Asset Size:**

\$230 million

**Demographic Reach:**

More than 8 million residents in the state of New Jersey

**KCIC Award:**

\$352,000 in 2009

**Website:**

NJSpotlight.com

**Project Description:**

NJ Spotlight is an online news service providing insight and information on issues critical to New Jersey, with the aim of informing and engaging the state’s communities and businesses. The Spotlight is a nonpartisan, independent, policy-centered and community-minded source, offering in-depth reporting on education, energy, health and other key issues affecting the state’s residents. In addition to its online reporting, NJ Spotlight also hosts and moderates live, in-person roundtables focused on timely topics facing the state of New Jersey. They are open to all residents. Past roundtables have focused on education reform and the role of charter schools, energy and the environment, and healthcare reform.

**Growth in average monthly unique visitors to NJSpotlight.com, June 2010 – June 2011:**

Nearly 300 percent, from 12,000 unique monthly visitors to 37,000

## Next Steps

To learn more about how your foundation can get involved in addressing your community's information needs and how to strengthen your community leadership role, consider taking the following actions:

- Learn about how other foundations have used information to play a leadership role in their community by reading *Opportunities for Foundation Leadership* (published February 2011). [www.informationneeds.org/leadership](http://www.informationneeds.org/leadership)
- Identify your community's information needs with Knight Foundation's *Information Toolkit*, built in partnership with the Monitor Institute and with research support from The Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project, which provides a step-by-step process to investigate the information health of your community. [www.infotoolkit.org](http://www.infotoolkit.org)
- Take action on one or a few of the *Journalism and Media Grant Making: Five Things You Need to Know, Five Ways to Get Started*. <http://www.knightfoundation.org/blogs/knightblog/2011/2/14/journalism-and-media-grant-making-ideas-to-help-you-get-started/>
- Talk to your board and community partners about how your foundation can use information to play a more effective leadership role to address a community need.
- Contact a foundation that has engaged in a community information initiative by looking at projects happening across the country on the InformationNeeds.org website.

## About FSG

FSG is a nonprofit consulting firm specializing in strategy, evaluation and research, founded in 2000 as Foundation Strategy Group and celebrating a decade of global social impact. Today, FSG works across sectors in every region of the globe – partnering with foundations, corporations, nonprofits and governments to develop more effective solutions to the world's most challenging issues. FSG brings together leaders who are hungry to exchange information, elevate learning and to create collective impact in discovering better ways to solve the world's most difficult social problems.

In the field of evaluation and performance measurement, FSG has significant client and thought leadership experience. FSG's approach focuses on the use of evaluation as a management tool to improve decision making and increase social impact. It uses traditional as well as innovative data-collection approaches to determine the effects and impacts an organization's efforts have produced over time – always with the purpose of informing and improving strategy and program implementation.

FSG's Strategic Learning and Evaluation Center offers several evaluation related services, which include designing and implementing developmental, formative and summative evaluations, building organization wide evaluation systems, building staff and grantee evaluation capacity, facilitating organizational learning processes and building the field through the development of tools, resources and research to support innovative evaluation practices.

For more information, visit [fsg.org](http://fsg.org)

**John S. and James L. Knight Foundation**

Suite 3300  
200 South Biscayne Boulevard  
Miami, FL. 33131-2349

(305) 908-2600

[knightfoundation.org](http://knightfoundation.org)

