



Opportunities for Leadership:

Meeting Community Information Needs 2011

Silicon Valley Community Foundation

September 2011

Go to informationneeds.org to see videos of the profiled foundations



 Knight Foundation

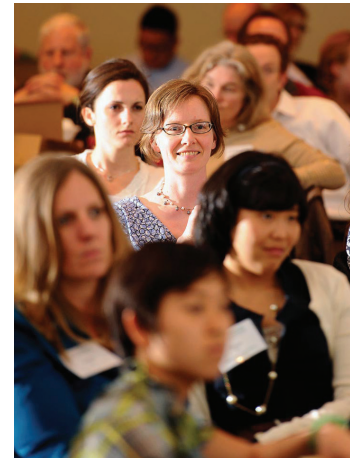
How a Catalytic Foundation Solidified Its Community Leadership

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](#)

1 **2** **3 Make Choices** What combination will best match your priorities?

CHALLENGE **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

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

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
- 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
- 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

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