

Family Foundations Spur Urban Renewal



Remarks By: DAVID G. FREY
Chair, Frey Foundation
CMF Annual Conference – October 2013

The annual conference of the Council of Michigan Foundations took place in October 2013 in Grand Rapids, Michigan. One of the highlights of the conference was the welcoming remarks made by David G. Frey, chair of the Frey Foundation. The remarks were made to guests prior to a wonderful performance by the Grand Rapids Symphony and Opera Grand Rapids. David highlighted the many ways family foundations have played an important role in turning Grand Rapids into one of the most dynamic and fast-growing cities in the Midwest. To quote David, Grand Rapids "...is hot! Smokin!" With David's permission, the text of his remarks is printed below.

Welcome to Grand Rapids – the most dynamic mid-size city in the Midwest if not the country! The escalating reputation of this great city reflects the remarkable role of philanthropy and private sector leadership in our customized version of the classic public/private partnership model. The momentum is palpable. We are self-reliant and mission certain. We have charted a course to be the most welcoming, creative and forward thinking city possible – we simply aspire to be best in class!

Early on we decided to take charge of our future and not let the oscillating fiscal fortunes and budget constraints of the state define our future. Private sector leadership coupled with extraordinary philanthropic support working side by side with the city, county, state and occasionally Washington has enabled us to achieve so very much in the last twenty years or so. As an example, Grand Action Committee, of which I am a co-chair with Dick DeVos, former president of Amway, and John Canepa, former chairman and CEO of Old Kent Financial, has forged public/private alliances to design, fund and construct six large scale capital projects:

- Van Andel Arena
- DeVos Place Convention Center
- Renovation/restoration of historic Meijer Civic Theatre
- Interior upgrade of DeVos Performance Hall
- MSU Medical School
- Downtown Market

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Neithercut Philanthropy Advisors handles the philanthropic affairs for a select group of families and we advise foundations – mostly family foundations – on how to engage in effective, rewarding philanthropy. NPA has more than 20 years of experience creating strategies for families and foundations. Recent clients include the William Davidson Foundation, the Frey Foundation, the Seth Bonder Foundation, the Max M. & Marjorie S. Fisher Foundation, the Matilda Wilson Fund, the Ruth Mott Foundation, the Kansas Health Foundation, and the Annabelle Foundation, as well as a number of individual philanthropists.

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These projects represent \$420 million of capital of which \$125 million or 30% is private (hard dollars and millions more of soft dollars). We have partnered with local foundations including corporate, community and private family foundations. And let us not forget to mention enormously generous families and individuals. The credo of the Grand Action Committee is: “**Think boldly, plan collegially and act with a sense of urgency.**” It works! We always gather private sector pledges first – then ask others to partner with us – it’s all about leadership!

While Grand Rapids is the hub of West Michigan, in many respects we represent the future of this great state. It is our culture that is the foundation of our success: collegial, nimble, philanthropic and entrepreneurial. We have a shared vision of our future and are bonded by a special pride of place. But it is philanthropy that is the glue and the clue to our success.

*Philanthropy
has become part
of the expectation
for inclusion in
the social fabric of
the city for those
blessed with the
resources to do so.*

One of our most distinguishing characteristics is the scale of philanthropy relative to the size of the city and the focus of the philanthropy which is primarily the future of the city. That is a highly unusual, powerful, and synergistic combination! Our family foundations, corporate foundations and community foundations have very different governance structures, funding mechanisms, investment styles and goals, and grant making processes, but they have overlapping, but not concentric, focus areas and priorities and exhibit an unusual level of cooperation and mutual respect and are committed with a passion to Grand Rapids.

We have much to be proud of and we are! We have been discovered! This is not your grandmother’s Grand Rapids! This place is hot! Smokin!

Thanks for making the journey whether from near or afar. Enjoy the evening.

– David Frey, Frey Foundation