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A Multi-Pronged Strategy to Guide Grant-Making from the Greater New Orleans Foundation's Environmental Fund

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While it is right and laudable that we support positive opportunities in our region that cultivate innovations in such things as entrepreneurship in integrated water management, we also have a duty to address issues that affect the most vulnerable populations in our service area. Such an approach has recently been championed by the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy in a report by Sarah Hansen.¹ In this work, Ms. Hansen points out the need for building the capacity of local organizations to confront environmental problems that are most relevant to the daily lives of their constituents. Noting that forty to fifty percent of grants and other contributions have gone over the course of the last twenty years to large national environmental organizations with annual budgets of \$5 million or more, Ms. Hansen goes on to observe that these entities have few tangible results to show for such a lengthy and hegemonic hold on funding. Her recommendation is that environmental funders devote at least twenty five percent of their grant-making to developing a diverse array of grass roots leadership that can engage a wider pool of social interests in environmental matters.² Without such base-building capacity, Hansen believes that national organizations will always “lack muscle and credibility” to pursue and win larger policy goals.³

In the New Orleans region, the above study's conclusions are perhaps even more relevant than they are in any other part of the country. Here, local environmental organizations have been isolated by their traditional approach to advocacy and by their monochromatic racial composition. Rather than widening their base, they have become even more isolated and have failed utterly to mobilize any meaningful source of support for correcting environmental outrages that, while shocking to the rest of the world, have left the majority of Louisianans feeling as helpless as ever.

Recommended Environmental Strategy No. 1

Set aside \$400,000 in 2012 for local environmental organizations to learn best practices in diversifying their constituencies and to engage with a variety of local groups with whom they would not otherwise

¹ Hansen, Sarah; *Cultivating the Grassroots: A Winning Approach for Environment and Climate Funders*, February, 2012. This is the latest contribution to the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy's "Philanthropy at Its Best" reports.

² "Grassroots organizing is particularly powerful where social, economic and environmental ills overlap, as is all too common in lower-income communities and communities of color. By engaging with the organizations that serve these communities and nurturing the growth of their leaders, we not only are investing in a healthy planet and people now, but also building a movement that reflects the future demographic majority of America." (Ibid, p. 1)

³ Ibid, p. 7

partner (i.e., civic groups, neighborhood associations, tribal groups, minority-based organizations, economic development agencies, business associations, commercial and sports fishers, entities that provide services to local fishers, public transportation advocates, etc.).⁴ National partners who can provide expertise to local environmental groups in this undertaking include the Center for Health, Environment and Justice (CHEJ), the Institute for Conservation Leadership (ICL) and New Orleans' own Deep South Center for Environmental Justice. Applications for this training/engagement process will be solicited through an open RFP process to be launched in late spring or early summer. Each environmental organization interested in participating in this initiative will be required to co-apply with at least three nonprofit partners with whom it would otherwise not have a "natural" affinity. Moreover, each group of applicants will be required to develop (in partnership with their mentor organization) by the end of the grant period a specific strategy for realizing the full potential of their partnership and for expanding it in the future.

Recommended Environmental Strategy No. 2

Set aside \$250,000 in 2012 to link experts like Dr. Howard Mielke (research professor of chemistry at the Tulane/Xavier Center for Bioenvironmental Research), one of the world's leading experts on lead contamination and abatement, to local citizens groups, neighborhood organizations (especially in neighborhoods of color), child care centers, and the like. There are two anticipated outputs to this particular funding cycle: 1) to educate the residents of neighborhoods that suffer from high lead concentrations in soil and homes about the dangers of continued exposure (especially for children) and about what they can do to rally governmental agencies (particularly the City of New Orleans and the State of Louisiana) to take this matter more seriously, and 2) to provide resources that can be used to provide direct abatement to child care centers and public playgrounds.⁵

In a recent article, *The Lens* offered the possibility of a direct line of causation between the high murder rate in New Orleans and traditionally high concentrations of lead in many of our city's poorest, primarily African American neighborhoods.⁶ In this piece, Mr. Mosely notes that New Orleans' violent crime rates have continued to rise dramatically in the face of equally noteworthy declines in such crimes on a national level.⁷ We are then introduced to the theory propounded by economist Rick Nevin that "lead

⁴ "We are going need more than just the traditional environmental organizations to get anywhere, and it is time for the philanthropic community to look beyond traditional environmental organizations." (Heetan Kalan, senior program officer for the Environmental Health and Justice Fund, the New World Foundation). Taken from *ibid*, p. 19.

⁵ See the article co-written by Dr. Mielke, Tina Covington, Paul Mielke, Jr., Fredericka Wolman, Eric Powell, and Chris Gonzales (funded by GNOF's Environmental Fund) "Soil Intervention as a Strategy for Lead Exposure Prevention: The New Orleans Lead-Safe Childcare Playground Project;" *Environmental Pollution xxx*, (2010), 1-7.

⁶ Mosely, Mark; "To Fight Violent Crime, New Orleans May Need to Get the Lead Out," *The Lens*, Feb. 7, 2012.

(<http://thelensnola.org/2012/02/07/lead-poisoning-implicated-in-new-orleans-crime/>)

⁷ "The statistics are mind-blowing. True, homicide rates rose in the late '60's and early '70's and remained elevated through the early '90's. The U.S. homicide rate was identical in 1974, 1981 and 1991— 9.8 per 100,000 U.S. inhabitants — with little variation in-between. But then, in 1994, the national rate began a sustained drop. By 2000, per capita homicides had fallen to their lowest level in 35 years (5.5 per 100,000 people) and remained low through 9/11, Iraq, Katrina, and The Great Recession (2007-2009). Even as unemployment doubled, the rate *continued to fall*, all the way down to 4.8 homicides per 100,000 in 2010. Preliminary F.B.I. reports suggest that violent crime dropped again in 2011. Today, in many cities, homicides are down to levels not seen since the

poisoning accounts for much of the variation in violent crime in the United States.”⁸ Even after lead was removed from gasoline and paint in the 1970s, it has continued to linger in the older housing stock and soil of New Orleans, which by some estimates contains about the same lead concentrations as those found in the “lead smelter community Trail, British Columbia, site of the largest zinc-lead smelter in North America.”⁹ Adding to local problem, according to these sources, is the fact that New Orleans has “a climate that allows for year-round access and exposure to contaminated soils.”¹⁰

This funding strategy offers us an opportunity to provide support to a cost-effective program that could potentially have an enormously beneficial impact on the most high-profile social/criminal problem facing New Orleans, a problem that has long had a deleterious impact on our economy, our tourism and conference industry, our quality of life and, most importantly, the lives of far too many of our citizens, especially our youth.

Recommended Environmental Strategy No. 3

Set aside \$400,000 over two years to fund research and convenings that are relevant to GNOF’s environmental areas of interest, including its coastal work. This is really just a slightly attenuated and proactive version of the “Drop Whatever Else You’re Doing Rule” outlined in the October 3rd, 2011 entry on the White Courtesy Telephone blog.

For example, Mark Davis at the Tulane Institute on Water Resources Law and Policy is trying to compile an inventory of all of the governmental and quasi-governmental entities with water management jurisdiction and responsibilities on the East Bank of Orleans, Jefferson and St. Bernard parishes in an effort to determine whether some of these entities have the capacity to assume additional water management tasks without having to create new, and potentially competing, legal authorities. This undertaking would complement the work currently being done by Waggoner and Ball Architects to create a coherent water management plan in the same geographic area with funding it has already secured from the State of Louisiana.

Another potential recipient of funding under this category is The Nature Conservancy, which seeks resources to convene a Lower Mississippi River Summit in an effort to develop a “21st Century Vision for the Lower River” that considers the multiple demands being placed on the system, including those of navigation, municipalities and various large industries. The point of such an undertaking would be to consider and to provide for the various river-related needs of communities, the wetlands, and commerce. This work is central to the success of our recently updated Coastal Master Plan, which relies heavily on fresh water and sediment from the Mississippi to mitigate critical wetland loss.

“halcyon” 1950’s. ... Unfortunately, New Orleans hasn’t shared in the national good fortune. Our city remains a tragic outlier from the broad trend toward less violent crime.” (Ibid)

⁸ See Shankar Vedantam’s July 8, 2007 article in the *Washington Post* entitled “They Poison You, Later to Target You: Research Links Lead Exposure with Violent Criminal Activity.” The same linkage is offered by economist Jessica Wolpaw Reyes in a June 2, 2011 article in *The Economist* (<http://www.economist.com/node/18775436>).

⁹ See Mosely, p. 4.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 4

I propose that we target key opportunities that fall under this category using our knowledge of relevant issues and our existing relationships with respected research entities rather than through the time-consuming “shotgun” approach of an RFP.

Recommended Environmental Strategy No. 4

This is less an environmental strategy per se than a means of further capitalizing the Coastal 5+1 Initiative to pursue a complementary suite of non-structural coastal adaptation strategies roughly outlined in the CPRA’s updated coastal master plan but not detailed in any meaningful way. It is my suggestion that we devote an additional \$500,000 to bringing together and funding (over an initial two-year period) a group of trusted nonprofits to create a complementary group of pilot projects that will provide models for virtually all coastal parishes to use as they adapt to the realities of wetland loss and to the implications of limited funding for additional structural protections (such as levees).

In this scenario, I would like to bring together a group of nonprofits and governmental organizations in lower Terrebonne Parish (a location that is particularly dependent on non-structural methods for its long-term survival within the CPRA’s master plan) to create place-specific but replicable models in coastal planning, affordable resilient housing, as well as citizen education and engagement. While much has recently been said about our region’s opportunities to cultivate exportable expertise through the aegis of the BRAF-backed Water Institute in Baton Rouge, I believe that Southeast Louisiana can develop an even more valuable knowledge base in best coastal planning practices that will soon be needed in coastal areas throughout the United States. What is presently lacking in this field in our state is a method for institutionalizing this expertise in officially recognized local and regional planning organizations.

Summary

If one is to weave a narrative that ties together our Coastal 5+1 work with the above proposed strategies for our Environmental Fund, such a narrative would focus on healing communities and empowering people who face severe environmental challenges through the provision of knowledge, access to national best practices, and the resources they need to implement the change they wish to see. Our environmental challenges are multiple and, at times, overwhelming. The above strategy allows GNOF to be proactive in furthering promising opportunities in our region (through such mechanisms as the “Water Challenge” and Environmental Strategy No. 4) while extending needed help to communities that have long been the victims of environmental degradations and political apathy.