

*The following article was published in the Foundation's 2008/09 Annual Report explaining the background to the organization's new strategic plan and the realignment of its mission.*

## **Strengthening our focus and impact on our community**

**By Grant Oliphant**

Shortly after The Pittsburgh Foundation launched a process to rethink its strategic direction in early 2009, a foundation colleague attending one of our community meetings declared, "I don't believe in strategic plans—they just slow executives down. I believe in leaders."

She meant it – or at least I chose to interpret it – as a compliment, remembering the wise words uttered by a successful businessman: "Leadership is action, not position." But I also couldn't help but be reminded of Yogi Berra's warning that, "If you don't know where you're going, chances are you'll end up somewhere else." So we pressed on.

Besides, our Foundation periodically urges the organizations we fund to ask themselves the most fundamental of questions: Why do they exist? What makes them relevant? What gives them unique value? It seemed only fair that we should put ourselves through the same rigor and invite the community we serve to help us arrive at the answers.

Many months later, we are grateful we did. What has emerged from more than a year of community conversations and deep organizational introspection is a bold blueprint for the foundation's strategic development. It has been unanimously endorsed by our directors and staff and has the support of our donors and partners, who, along with other constituents we engaged, have responded with enthusiastic affirmation. We also know that it's practical, because we have been living it for the past year—building the plane, as the saying goes, while we were flying it.

We did not launch this process in search of a vision. From the outset, the Foundation's Board of Directors, staff and I all shared a hope that our organization would be a true force for transformation, a resource to help our community push past any lingering resistance to change and move forward into a new era of possibility. We envisioned a foundation whose legacy would be measured not just in dollars raised or given, but also in the tough conversations it convened, the important issues it tackled, and the measurable changes it helped produce.

There was nothing obvious in that aspiration. Community foundations operate in a fiercely competitive environment. Our public charity status requires us to raise money each year by bringing new donors and new dollars into philanthropy. In today's financial world, however, donors have a wealth of choices about where to locate charitable funds.

This competitive pressure has been a spur for many community foundations to build their missions entirely around growing assets and promoting customer service to enhance their attractiveness to donors—worthy, meaningful goals, which we happily embrace. In isolation, however, they can distort a foundation’s focus and cause it to operate as little more than a “charitable bank.”

At The Pittsburgh Foundation, we are proud of the quality service we provide our donors, and our planning process gave us some important ideas for how to strengthen it even further. But we believe the unique value of community foundations—our differentiating advantage in the marketplace, if you will—lies in that innocuous-sounding first word: community.

The mission pursued by only a handful of community foundations across the U.S., and one to which The Pittsburgh Foundation is passionately committed, is to place community at the center of everything we do, be that through leadership, grantmaking, convening and collaborative engagement as well as through services to help and support our donors, and the way that we cultivate new donors.

To truly embrace this ideal, we needed to assimilate the hopes and expectations of the Foundation’s major partners – including donors and nonprofit organizations – in answering some key questions: What would this look like? What does our region want to see in its community foundation? How should the Foundation develop its strategy as a champion for positive change? How do we contribute to Pittsburgh’s continued revival?

We can all sense the evidence of a tremendous new spirit in Pittsburgh. Powerful engines of transformation are at work, and the examples are all around us.

Most recently, we can look at the extraordinary success of the reform efforts of the Pittsburgh Public Schools, the redevelopment of our riverfronts, the vibrancy of the Cultural District (and I firmly believe that Downtown Pittsburgh flourishes today because of the investment in this area over many years), our green building initiatives, the dynamic presence of our research universities and our diverse mix of industries. I could go on.

At the same time our region still faces significant challenges including racial inequity, poverty, derelict run-down neighborhoods, environmental degradation and budget woes at the city and county. Helping our community meet those challenges is part of a community foundation’s job. We recognize that to play a part in furthering sustainable change requires boldness, commitment and courage, and in striving for transformation we inevitably encounter controversy and risk, as demonstrated by The Pittsburgh Promise, potentially one of the biggest transformative programs in our community.

We can only aspire to the wonderful dreams we hold on to for Pittsburgh’s continued revival by meeting head-on those challenges that stand in our way, by working together to address them and by embracing the ideal that there are no more throwaway people.

At The Pittsburgh Foundation we have framed our strategic plan around these principles with the aim of playing a tangible role in contributing to sustainable change in our community where people are not disposable, where everyone is valued and where opportunities are developed and shared by all.

In pursuit of these goals, our overarching objectives are: to function as a community leader in building and supporting sustainable communities, to serve as the community's portal for philanthropic activity and to always be an effective and respected steward of the Foundation's assets.

The Foundation is refining its leadership role, exemplified by its convening activities around Pittsburgh's city-county consolidation debate, its work with The Pittsburgh Promise scholarship program and its bold response to the economic crisis with the creation of an emergency fund, Neighbor-Aid.

Additionally, we are offering 'go-to' resources for philanthropy in our region and initiatives are already underway to develop more interactive, collaborative and transparent relationships with our donors, our partners and the community at large. Among them is PittsburghGives, a new on-line database offering comprehensive profiles of the region's nonprofit organizations. PittsburghGives launched in the fall of 2009 with a celebrated "day of giving," providing an invaluable research tool as well as on-line giving capabilities. This tool enables donors to give directly from their funds to their chosen charities. We also introduced a charitable gift card in time for the holiday season.

The Foundation has removed constraints around the policy governing the Foundation's unrestricted grantmaking, which the community told us had become too inflexible and narrow-focused. Our new guidelines seek to integrate the key issues of environment, economics, and social equity into three new funding categories: Self Sufficient Individuals and Families, Healthy Communities and A Vibrant Democracy.

(Additional information about the Foundation's grantmaking guidelines is available by [clicking here](#))

This is a foundation formed through generations by donors whose generosity was married to a love of Pittsburgh and a desire to see our community thrive. In embracing its new plan, The Pittsburgh Foundation has affirmed and renewed our commitment to that spirit.

To lead your community foundation is noble work which I and my Foundation colleagues, including all our Board members and staff, are privileged and proud to do. We are inspired by the words of former diplomat and United Nations Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld: "Never look down to test the ground before taking your next step; only he who keeps his eye fixed on the far horizon will find the right road."

***Grant Oliphant is President & CEO of The Pittsburgh Foundation***