

Impact Story

Creating Greener Communities

Green Building and Green Neighborhoods Working Group

In 2005, a small group of Funders' Network members began talking informally about the opportunities that exist at the intersections of green buildings, green neighborhoods, and smart growth. Led by Jon Jensen, then a program officer at the Cleveland-based George Gund Foundation, the funders conducted an online survey of dozens of funders to gauge the level of interest. "The response was overwhelming," Jensen recalls. To build on this newfound interest, Jensen asked the Funders' Network to host a national conference for funders. Demonstrating its commitment to collaboration, the Funders' Network invited several other funder networks to participate as co-sponsors. The conference was held in Cleveland in October 2005.

Drawing on the enthusiasm emerging from the conference, the Funders' Network created the Green Building and Green Neighborhoods learning network. The group's work plan calls for supporting funder collaboration on issues such as providing technical assistance and support to cities that are working to reduce their carbon footprints, assessing state and federal policy opportunities, and strengthening green building standards. Equally important, the learning network has brought together funders from a variety of program areas, including healthy/active living, affordable housing, workforce development, education, climate change, and transportation. "We see this as an opportunity to help cement the bonds between green building and smart growth," says Jensen, now the executive director of the Park Foundation in Ithaca, N.Y.

"The emergence of the green building group is really about TFN being strategically opportunistic," Jensen continues. "They are close enough to their members that they have early insight into what members' interests are, what trends are out there in the grapevine. So if the interest is there, they throw some resources into it. Once that buzz and energy builds, it becomes more formalized. The take away is that I'm hard pressed to think of another affinity group that would have been willing to take on something like this, and to pull it off as well as they did. For me, it's really a hallmark of their willingness to extend beyond their mission at times to keep growing. Now, they have funders thinking about green buildings as a smart growth issue. That agility is critical."

Just three years-old, the working group has already influenced how members approach their work. The George Gund Foundation, for example, is considering a policy that will only support construction of LEED-certified buildings in its community development and housing programs. "We would never even be thinking about this if it were not for the Funders' Network," says John Mitterholzer, senior program officer for the environment at Gund. Through the learning network, Mitterholzer was able to connect with the Kresge Foundation and Heinz Endowments, foundations that already had robust green building policies. "They told me what to do and what not to do," he says.