

Impact Story

Giving Members the Tools to Shape Policy ***The Neptis Foundation—Toronto, Ontario, Canada***

Throughout the 1980s, the Canadian philanthropist Martha Shuttleworth had focused most of her resources on the anti-tobacco movement. When she started the Neptis Foundation in Toronto in 1996, she was looking to support groups and issues that would have an equally big impact. “My intention from the beginning was to do something with the big picture,” she explains. “I wanted to address things at a systemic level, to move issues forward.” At the time, she says, the region surrounding Toronto was adding about 100,000 new residents per year, a growth rate with huge environmental, social, and economic consequences. The board saw an opportunity to address environmental issues in an urban context, but rather than funding organizations working on these issues, Neptis set out to fund research. “We wanted to produce reliable information that would lead to action,” Shuttleworth says.

Over the years, the Neptis Foundation has become one of the leading funders of nonpartisan, scholarly research on important public policy issues related to land use, transportation, and environmental issues in urban regions. Over the past eight years, Neptis has funded over 30 original research reports on growth management and policy issues in the Toronto metropolitan region. When the foundation was starting out, there was little public interest in comprehensive regional smart growth. Since then, however, the foundation has helped spur a renaissance among policymakers and citizens alike, transforming the scale at which issues of energy, congestion, transportation, and CO₂ emissions were addressed by the last two provincial governments.

“Liberal and conservative governments have been supportive of regional growth management,” says Tony Coombes, the foundation’s executive director. The government has created an “extraordinary apparatus” to manage regional issues—including a 30-year growth plan, a greenbelt, and a regional transport corporation called Metrolinx. “It’s hard to claim credit for all of that, but our research has definitely shaped the debate,” Coombes continues. “Government doesn’t always like what you produce because the research might not accord with political agendas, but the nonpartisan nature and quality of our research has given us credibility. It’s hard to argue with the facts.”

The Funders’ Network has been a key ally throughout the foundation’s development. Through Hooper Brooks, a founding board member of the Network, Shuttleworth met other funders who were interested in smart growth. After Neptis joined the Network, Coombes served as a board member for six years. “TFN conferences, meetings, and publications have been of great assistance to us in developing the foundation’s mission and activities,” Coombes says. “The Funders’ Network enabled us to connect in depth and breadth with the activities of other smart growth funders and the issues they faced. It provided us with an extensive network of people with whom we could discuss topics. The board structure and the excellence of staff were key to facilitating these benefits.”