



**Awareness, Capacity, and Leadership:  
The River Partnership of Community Foundations  
Phase I Report: 2006 – 2008**

Prepared for the:

**Funders' Network for  
Smart Growth and Livable Communities**

and

**River Partnership of Community Foundations**

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## Foreword

In the fall of 2008, the Funders' Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities commissioned a qualitative assessment of the first three years (Phase I: 2006 – 2008) of the River Partnership of Community Foundations, a collaborative effort among 18 community foundations who are working together to address the negative impacts that sprawling patterns of development and increasing growth and development pressures are having on the Mississippi River, its tributaries, and communities in the River Corridor region. The Funders' Network has provided staff support and strategic consultation to the Partnership since its inception.

The Network commissioned two consultants, Anne McEnany and Neil F. Carlson, to assist with this effort. In the fall of 2008, Anne interviewed representatives from participating foundations to capture their thoughts about the role that the Partnership has played in their work and corresponding changes they see in their communities. During the winter of 2008 and spring of 2009, Neil summarized the interview findings and wrote the report, in an effort to capture each individual foundation's story and to highlight cross-cutting themes.

During Phase I, the Partnership focused primarily on raising awareness and influencing knowledge about environmental, economic, and cultural issues throughout the region and strategies to create places that are environmentally healthy and sustainable, socially equitable, and economically vibrant, Phase II (2009 – 2011) will focus even more intently than before on facilitating individual and collective funder action and leadership, providing tools and resources to help participating foundations pursue strategies that correspond to the Partnership's long-term outcomes. As we prepare to engage in the next phase, we are pleased to have the opportunity to share this assessment of the first phase, so that we may individually and collectively learn from and build upon it.

The River Partnership acknowledges and values the financial support that facilitated the work pursued during Phase I. Through a challenge grant from The McKnight Foundation, the Partnership leveraged additional financial support from the New York Community Trust, the IdeaLab grant program (an initiative of the Community Foundations Leadership Team through the Council on Foundations), and participating community foundations. The Funders' Network and Partnership participants are grateful for this generous support.

## **Introduction**

In 2005, the Funders' Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities convened an exploratory conversation among community foundations located throughout the ten-state Mississippi River Corridor region—from Minnesota to Louisiana—to discuss the possibility of creating a partnership to help preserve, protect, and restore the treasured rivers of the region. This conversation led in 2006 to the creation of the River Partnership of Community Foundations, a collaborative effort among 18 community foundations located along the Mississippi and its tributaries—institutions that share an interest in how these rivers contribute to the economic, cultural, and environmental vitality of their communities. The Partnership embraces two equally important organizing principles: 1) a belief that community foundations represent a significant civic leadership infrastructure; and 2) a shared passion for, and commitment to, the Mississippi River and its tributaries as treasured natural resources. There are deep historical, emotional, and ecological bonds throughout the ten-state Mississippi River Corridor region, yet these connections are often undermined by short-sighted growth and development decisions. This Partnership seeks to embolden a new constituency of philanthropic leaders to help leverage the Mississippi River and its tributaries to achieve better outcomes for the region's communities—and for the rivers themselves.

## **Mission, Vision, and Goals**

The River Partnership's mission is to bolster the capacity and impact of community foundations to improve the environmental, economic, and cultural vitality of the communities along the Mississippi River and its tributaries. The vision of the Partnership is to create a network of community foundations in the Mississippi River Corridor who work together to ensure that the Mississippi River and its tributaries are honored, shared resources that are vital, healthy, attractive, fun, and prosperous.

Over the past four years, the River Partnership has met biannually in communities throughout the region, including New Orleans (twice), St. Paul, Dubuque, Memphis, St. Cloud, Little Rock, and St. Louis. While the precise format of each meeting has varied from place to place, all meetings shared four goals: 1) strengthening relationships, sharing knowledge, and forging stronger connections among community foundations; 2) advancing the collective and individual work of the River Partnership and its participants; 3) connecting to other projects and efforts underway throughout

the River Corridor region; and 4) learning from the place, through site visits and dialogue with local leaders.

### **Community Foundation Leadership**

Community foundations are uniquely positioned to develop the sophisticated local responses that are needed to address the complex, systemic challenges facing the Mississippi River and its tributaries. Rather than offering easy answers to these challenges, the River Partnership has tried to give partner foundations the resources they need to lead the way forward in their communities. Three years into the formal River Partnership, participating foundations are making progress. Some have made great strides while others are emerging more slowly. Taken together, however, the River Partnership has emerged as a vital network of community-based institutions that are committed to protecting and preserving these national treasures.

### **Partnership Activities, Resources, and Support**

The River Partnership provides a variety of services to participants. **Bi-annual meetings** are designed to foster networking and strengthen relationships, advance learning and knowledge, and build skills and capacities. **Asset mapping and identification** helps participating foundations uncover and connect to potential partners, allies, and colleagues in their home communities. **Communications tools and templates** help participants frame their river-related work for external stakeholders and other constituents. **Consulting services and technical assistance**—such as identifying speakers and sharing special-event templates—help participants achieve their desired goals. Finally, the **River Partnership Resource Pool** offers participating foundations modest financial investments to help seed, support, and advance their individual work. Participants who meet the Resource Pool eligibility criteria—submission of a board resolution or CEO letter, completion of an annual benchmarking data survey, and completion of an asset identification/mapping exercise—receive annual investments of \$5,000 to \$10,000 to support their individual efforts.

### **The Report**

Yet the real story of the River Partnership lies not in these activities but rather in the results they have produced among participating foundations and the communities they serve. This report seeks to tell two types of stories about these results: case studies of individual community foundations and

the themes that cut across participants' work. Each of the 14 case studies presented here highlights how participating foundations used the skills, knowledge, and tools they developed through engagement with the River Partnership to address the unique needs of their respective communities.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, the cross-cutting themes showcase progress that the River Partnership as a whole has made towards achieving its goals: increasing awareness among communities and community foundations about the River; building the capacity of community foundations; fostering strong partnerships among community foundations; and promoting the existence of long-term investments, commitment, and ability to financially support the Partnership's mission and vision. The report begins with the case studies—organized geographically from south to north—with cross-cutting themes embedded throughout.

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<sup>1</sup> Although 18 foundations have participated in the Partnership over the years, the 14 case studies presented here reflect the experience of participants who have been consistently engaged since the Partnership's inception in 2005.

## CASE STUDIES

### **The Greater New Orleans Foundation—New Orleans, Louisiana**

*How can a foundation persuade young people to care about the environment as an issue critical to their community's economic future? This case study shows how The Greater New Orleans Foundation helped establish learning centers for young people in two environmentally-sensitive communities adjacent to the Mississippi.*

#### **The Context—**

One of the things that made Hurricane Katrina so devastating was the loss of wetlands along the Louisiana coast (wetlands historically acted as a natural buffer for the mainland, absorbing and dispersing hurricane storm surges). Between 1932 and 2000, coastal Louisiana lost over 1,875 square miles of land, and scientists estimate that the state will lose an additional 513 square miles by 2050. Approximately 24 square miles of Louisiana turn to open water each year. Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005 alone converted approximately 217 square miles of marsh to water.

For the residents of Plaquemines Parish, a predominantly low-income community along the Mississippi south of New Orleans, wetland protection is a matter of economic survival as well. Coastal erosion threatens to ruin the Gulf fisheries that have sustained generations of fishermen in southern Louisiana. Ironically, coastal erosion actually improves fishing in the short term as nutrients from the wetlands slough into the sea—but when the wetlands are gone, the fisheries suddenly collapse. How do you convince young people, in the face of seeming evidence to the contrary, that their economic futures depend on environmental protection and wetland preservation?

#### **The Approach—**

The Greater New Orleans Foundation, working in partnership with its affiliate, the Plaquemines Community Foundation, established two learning sites that focused on environmental education outside of traditional classroom settings. With support from the River Partnership's Resource Pool, the foundations are hiring specialists to develop environmental curricula for the Woodlands Trail and Park, Inc., a nonprofit organization with a 20-mile stretch of adjoining walking, biking, and equestrian trails at the northern point of the parish. The foundations are also underwriting planning

and content development for “The America’s Wetland Experience at River’s End,” a proposed discovery center to be situated 40 miles south of the Woodlands Trail and Park.

“This is the key to wetlands restoration—getting the youth (and future voters) engaged in the issues and helping them understand that they have a role to play in pushing their elected officials to act,” says Marco Cocito-Monoc, director of regional initiatives for The Greater New Orleans Foundation. “This needs to be ramped up over the course of the next generation. Linking everyday education issues to the river is critical to this.”

### **The Results—**

While the impact of the foundation’s educational efforts will emerge over the coming years, the work in Plaquemines Parish has brought new life to The Greater New Orleans Foundation. “The River Partnership has helped to re-energize our focus on the environment,” Cocito-Monoc says. “We have an environmental fund that had been inactive for several years. We have been able to bring local experts with national profiles to the table to serve on the fund’s advisory committee. The River Partnership helped to get the fires burning again, to help the group define what they really wanted to do with this fund.”

Meanwhile, the devastation wrought by Katrina and Rita have refocused residents’ attention on the environment—a trend the foundation hopes to deepen and extend among young people. “It’s a weird and wonderful little community we have down here,” Cocito-Monoc says. “Before Katrina, lower Plaquemines was probably one of the most isolated communities in the country. But now that their lives have been turned upside down, people have taken it upon themselves to learn as much as they can and challenge their leaders to do everything in their power to preserve their rich ecosystem, culture, and economy. We want to build on that momentum for the next generation.”

## **Arkansas Community Foundation—Little Rock, Arkansas**

*How does a community foundation whose principal focus lies in addressing health, education, and human needs also address the environment? This case study examines how the Arkansas Community Foundation used the issue of water quality as a platform from which to launch a statewide conversation about how environmental concerns affect the foundation's core issues.*

### **The Context—**

With over \$100 million in assets, the Arkansas Community Foundation, one of the largest philanthropies in the state, has the financial stature to lead on key issues affecting Arkansas. And with 26 local affiliate offices throughout the state, the foundation also has a significant network of relationships on the ground to support statewide work. Yet because Arkansas consistently ranks among the bottom in state-by-state rankings of health, education, and economic well-being, the foundation is under pressure from donors and other stakeholders to focus resources on meeting basic human needs and promoting economic development.

In this context, says Cecilia Patterson, program director, there is a tendency to see environmental issues as meriting consideration only after other needs have been attended to. “With so many pressing human and social justice issues, it can sometimes seem like the environment is a frill,” she says. With external stakeholders pushing the foundation towards other issues, Patterson had to think more expansively about how she framed the foundation’s work around the Mississippi and its tributaries.

### **The Approach—**

When the foundation began its asset mapping work (a requirement of River Partnership participation), Patterson and her colleagues realized that the solution was to link rivers—and water quality more broadly—to the foundation’s core issues. As it happened, the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation, one of Arkansas’s largest private foundations, had just commissioned a report on water resources in Arkansas. Based on public data, opinion surveys, and interviews with water experts, the report argues that “Arkansans are at a critical juncture in water management.” Ground water levels are dropping, the report noted, adding that poorly planned development is contributing to flooding

and inadequate water supplies. “The decisions we make,” the report concluded, “can move us either toward crisis or sustainability.”

Drawing on the water resources report, the community foundation held two meetings with economic development authorities, environmental groups, and education advocates to discuss how water quality affects health, economy, and environment throughout the state. “The meetings were great,” Patterson recalls. “We convened 40 people, all of whom were working on and concerned about water-related issues in Arkansas, but many of whom had never been in the same room with each other.”

### **The Results—**

In 2009, the foundation will convene a statewide meeting focused on Arkansas’ water resources, with an emphasis on rivers (especially the Mississippi). The one-day summit will revolve around opportunities and challenges surrounding Arkansas’ water resources, and it will include overview presentations, topical speakers, small group discussions, policy analysis and strategy development, and a challenge to develop sustainable funding committed to the preservation of water resources.

As Patterson notes, the summit leverages the foundation’s stature as an honest broker, while also expanding the constituency for water-related issues. The Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation will have a venue to promote its report, and scores of stakeholders across the state will have an opportunity to discuss stewardship of Arkansas’ river resources. “The foundation is really in a good position to do this,” Patterson notes. “We are seen as an objective entity, whose only concern is the well-being of the state as a whole, and this will be an opportunity to take the lead on a topic of vital importance that impacts every citizen of our state. The key will be to link the health of our water resources to our physical, economic, and social health.”

Although it’s too soon to know what the summit’s long-term impact will be, Patterson has high hopes. “Ideally, I’d like to see this as the beginning of a statewide collaborative around water quality and conservancy,” she says. Institutionally, foundation leaders hope that the summit will help establish the foundation as a community leader and a valued convener around water/river resources.

## **Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi—Hernando, Mississippi**

*How can a community foundation provide leadership to help make public investments and land use planning more effective? This case study examines how the Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi used its convening and leadership skills to shape the trajectory of a greenways development plan in DeSoto County, Mississippi.<sup>2</sup>*

### **The Context—**

In 2004, the DeSoto County Economic Development Council (EDC) convened a group of business and civic leaders to highlight the importance of building greenspace into development plans in this rapidly growing region across the river from Memphis, Tenn. “We are the 23<sup>rd</sup> fastest-growing country in the nation,” says Tom Pittman, president and CEO of the Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi. “The EDC was looking at how they could attract companies to the region, and they saw that higher-income workers wanted access to nature. So EDC wanted to make sure that there were still some trees left in the middle of all this growth.”

A short time later, the board of supervisors launched the DeSoto County Greenways Project to develop an attractive, cost-effective, and convenient greenway system that connects public and private open spaces with sidewalks and trails throughout the county. But how could a community foundation that was just four years old shape such a large and multi-faceted public-planning process?

### **The Approach—**

Undaunted, Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi sought to carve out a role as the public convener. A foundation board member was appointed to the greenways advisory board, where he helped establish a role for the foundation. Thanks to the foundation’s involvement in the River Partnership, Pittman and his colleagues had access to experts and best practices. “We learned from an early River Partnership meeting that foundations had played a role in greenway planning before,” Pittman says, referring to a presentation made to the River Partnership by Tom Woiwode of the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan, who shared the story of his foundation’s

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<sup>2</sup> Greenways are corridors of land recognized for their ability to connect people and places together. These ribbons of open space are located within linear corridors that are either natural, such as rivers and streams, or manmade, such as abandoned railroad beds and utility corridors (Source: [www.greenways.com](http://www.greenways.com)).

successful greenways project for metropolitan Detroit. “It’s such a natural fit, but it’s not something we would have done had it not been for our involvement with the River Partnership,” Pittman says.

In June 2008, the foundation hosted a symposium that brought together over 100 business leaders, city officials, nonprofit leaders, and conservationists for a day-long discussion of greenways. “It was a great conversation,” said Peggy Linton, the foundation’s community development director. A national expert discussed the benefits of greenways, and regional representatives from elsewhere along the Mississippi discussed how they had established a successful a Mississippi River Corridor.

The official purpose of the symposium was to explore the ways to connect the river to green infrastructures, specifically to the greenways of DeSoto County. But, by hosting the event, the foundation was also able to shape the agenda, exploring how greenways can be tied to the environment, increased physical activity, historic sites, and tourism. Following the gathering, the DeSoto County Board of Supervisors voted to fund the position and work of a greenways coordinator with a \$150,000 first-year commitment.

The greenways project also connects nicely to a core initiative of the foundation—a campaign to fight childhood obesity. According to Linton, “Greenways are a way of getting families out and walking, exercising together. What better way than getting them out in the fresh air? One of the things we discovered is that kids in suburban areas don’t get as much exercise as those in rural and urban areas. We want to give kids places to go that are beyond their driveways.”

### **The Results—**

The foundation’s role in the greenways initiative has had a host of benefits. First, it gave the foundation, which was founded in 2002, a clear public identity. “We showed that we can pull people together, provide leadership, and make it real,” Pittman says. Second, it has helped the foundation attract new donors. “This has introduced us to a whole new set of donors,” Pittman continues. For example, the Mississippi chapter of the Audubon Society launched a \$1 million endowment campaign to be housed at the community foundation. And the foundation itself recently launched an environmental endowment to support the greenways work and other environmental initiatives. Finally, the Mississippi Levee Board has made an informal commitment of \$500,000 of in-kind work in support of the greenways project.

## **Cross-Cutting Theme: Increasing Awareness**

*From the outset, the foundations in the River Partnership recognized that one of their main challenges was to build support—among participating foundation staff and board, local decisionmakers, and the public at large—for work that focused on the Mississippi and its tributaries. The River Partnership’s initial efforts have sought to raise awareness among community foundations—and the communities they serve—about the environmental, economic, and cultural importance of the river. Equally important, the Partnership has sought to create tools that align with participating foundations’ different sizes, resources, capacities, and skills.*

### **What the River Partnership Has Done—**

*Developed concrete communications products that gave participants tools to mobilize key stakeholders in their communities.* The River Partnership created a suite of marketing and communications products that could be tailored to each foundation’s circumstances and the audiences they sought to reach. These tools include a brochure about the River Partnership, a PowerPoint presentation about the river, and a pair of articles that partners could use in their own newsletters. Down the road, the River Partnership intends to create an “event template” that partners could use to mobilize stakeholders in their local communities. If called upon, the River Partnership will also help partners access expert speakers and content specialists who can speak in various venues and thereby reinforce the message the foundations want to deliver.

*Provided partner foundations with the intellectual grounding and resources (speakers, organizing models, outreach strategies) to help their communities see the river as a vital economic, environmental, and cultural resource.* “In our area, there are only about three places in about 100 miles where you can see the Mississippi,” says Peggy Linton, community development director at the Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi. “Yet everything in the culture has been formed by the river: the farming, the levees, the economy. It’s part of who we are, but we don’t see it. Without the River Partnership, we wouldn’t have recognized this as much.”

### **How Partner Foundations Have Benefitted—**

River Partnership meetings have become an important venue for participating staff members to learn by “showing and sharing”—through formal presentations, facilitated dialogue, and informal conversations. “All the meetings and conversations sparked so many ideas for me,” says Pam Coaxum, board president of the Greater East St. Louis Community Fund. “We often undervalue the power of a forum like this. But there are very few trusted environments for community foundations to talk. This created an environment for learning.” This learning has also filtered down to foundation staff members who are not directly involved in the River Partnership. “I am learning so much about the river through our RP meetings and coming back and sharing it in staff meetings and board meetings,” says Cecilia Patterson, program director for the Arkansas Community Foundation. “I always have this as part of my Program Director report and put written material about it in our board books.”

Participating foundations have created informal learning networks among one another. Participating foundations regularly swap program ideas and exchange outreach strategies. Foundations in the same region now keep each other abreast of their work and have begun collaborating on issues of common concern. “I see the meetings as a place where a CEO at a community foundation can sit down and reflect on the work that they do and share with others the work they are doing,” says Nancy Van Milligen, president/CEO of the Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque.

The communications tools and messaging strategies have given partner foundations a new, more effective language for mobilizing stakeholders. Marco Cocito-Monoc, director of regional initiatives for The Greater New Orleans Foundation, notes how the River Partnership has given the foundation and its affiliates a framework for connecting the interests of shrimpers, oil, and gas executives, and local communities. “The river here has a vibrant economy—seafood, oil and gas—and if we want to keep that going, we have to address the environmental issues. The River Partnership taught us that there really aren’t permanent separations between economic and environmental constituencies and issues.” With a service area that encompasses 12 parishes, four of which have affiliate foundations, The Greater New Orleans Foundation has to walk a fine line when it comes to discussing the environment. “Oil and gas interests are represented on the affiliate boards, but so are commercial fishermen,” Cocito-Monoc continues. “The River Partnership’s communications framework has enabled us to bridge gaps. It brings a perspective and a vocabulary we didn’t have before.”

## **Community Foundation of Greater Memphis—Memphis, Tennessee**

*How can a community foundation with a limited budget for discretionary grantmaking leverage its resources on behalf of the river? This case study shows how the Community Foundation of Greater Memphis partnered with a private foundation to help guide and generate public support for a greenways planning process along the Wolf River, a tributary of the Mississippi that runs through Memphis.*

### **The Context—**

With \$250 million in assets, the Community Foundation of Greater Memphis is one of the larger foundations in the River Partnership—yet it also has one of the smallest pools of discretionary funds, just over \$800,000 per year. “When we joined the River Partnership, there were a lot of questions because we hadn’t done anything like this before,” says Melissa Wolowicz, director of grants and initiatives. “But exploring other relationships and looking for funding together—that was something our board was open to.”

Given its financial constraints, the foundation needed to develop a strategy for addressing the environmental, social, and economic impact of the Mississippi that didn’t require a big commitment of money. Moreover, given the fast current and swirling eddies in this part of river, few Memphians have a personal affection for the river, often forged through recreational uses, that residents to the north have.

### **The Solution—**

Through the foundation’s asset mapping process, Wolowicz and her colleagues found a vibrant community of stakeholders—funders, nonprofits, and citizens—who cared deeply about the region’s rivers—specifically the Wolf River, a picturesque tributary of the Mississippi that flows westward to a confluence on the north side of Memphis. Led by the Wolf River Conservancy, a nonprofit land trust that had helped to preserve over 18,000 acres along the Wolf River, a group of advocates had been championing creation of the Wolf River Greenway, a 30-mile path that would connect neighborhoods and parks in Shelby County, and the cities of Memphis, Germantown, and Collierville.

The greenway proposal had generated interest among city and county officials, as well as from the Hyde Family Foundations, one of the largest private philanthropies in Memphis. After some discussion, the community foundation jumped at the opportunity to partner with the Hyde Foundation to fund the Wolf River Greenway. “This was something they were going to do already, and we were looking for ways to partner with other foundations,” Wolowicz says. “They had done all the due diligence, and when we talked to them about projects that were river-related, this was the best use of our money.”

### **The Result—**

The Community Foundation of Greater Memphis put up \$10,000 to support the planning, design, and implementation of the greenway. One of the Wolf River Conservancy’s priorities has been to ensure that the greenway is open and accessible to everyone. “They want to connect upper-income communities to lower-income communities, and our resources will bring them all together to plan and ensure access for all,” Wolowicz says.

More important, the foundation has reached out to its donors for support. In November 2008, for instance, the foundation hosted a donor event featuring a panel of national and local experts who gave the foundation’s donors an inside look at some of the leading efforts to expand and improve greenspaces. The briefing featured details of the comprehensive design plan for Shelby Farms, as well as an overview of activities related to the Wolf River Conservancy and the Mississippi River Corridor.

“We believe that if it’s important to our area, it may be important to our donors as well,” says Robert Fockler, the foundation’s president. “Introducing our donors to initiatives and to experts in certain fields is a part of what we do.”

## **The Community Foundation of Owensboro-Daviess County—Owensboro, Kentucky**

*How can a small community foundation with a single staff person influence a public conversation about riverfront development? This case study shows how The Community Foundation of Owensboro-Daviess County, a regional affiliate of The Community Foundation of Louisville, engaged donors and the public in a conversation about riverfront development in Owensboro, Ky.*

### **The Context—**

One of the main reasons The Community Foundation of Owensboro-Daviess County joined the River Partnership was because it wanted to help shape the city's \$40 million plan to redevelop the city's waterfront along the Ohio River. However, with just a single paid staff member and no operating budget of its own (the foundation is an affiliate of The Community Foundation of Louisville), The Community Foundation of Owensboro-Daviess County had neither the staff nor the financial resources to be a major player. Nevertheless, Executive Director Sara Hemingway was able to pair support from the River Partnership with some savvy outreach and relationship-building to achieve an influence far beyond the foundation's modest resources.

### **The Approach—**

Through its asset mapping process—a requirement of all participants in the River Partnership—the foundation discovered the Ohio River Visions conference. Held on November 15, 2008, the one-day gathering at the Owensboro Museum of Science and History brought together environmental groups, business leaders, and policymakers to discuss the Ohio River and its importance to the culture, environment, and economy of the region. By signing on as one of the first co-sponsors, the foundation was able to help shape the agenda and build relationships with other stakeholders, including environmental groups like the Sierra Club and the Waterkeeper Alliance, as well as the local utility company. “The conference was a great opportunity for us to leverage our resources,” says Hemingway. “This really connected the dots for me.”

The Community Foundation of Owensboro-Daviess County also brought added credibility and resources to the conference. “Our participation really helped solidify the conference,” Hemingway notes. For example, Hemingway persuaded the Marilyn & William Young Charitable Foundation, Owensboro's largest grantmaker, to help underwrite a week-long visit from the P.A. Denny, a

science classroom hosted aboard an authentic sternwheel paddleboat. Operated by the Ohio River Valley Water Sanitation Commission Educational Foundation, the riverboat brought scores of visitors—families, school field trips, and tourists—to the waterfront and generated significant media coverage for the conference. “It was a great hands-on opportunity to bring river education to our community,” Hemingway says.

### **The Results—**

The conference was a success on several levels. First, the conference helped the foundation become more comfortable playing a leadership role in the community. “We’ve definitely taken a leadership role in the conference planning, fund raising, and audience outreach,” Hemingway says. In the short-term, the foundation will provide historic signage for the city’s new riverfront park, helping to connect local residents to the river and to their historical and cultural heritage. Down the road, the foundation may sponsor an exhibit on river heritage at the Owensboro Museum of Science and History. “People need to be reminded about our connection to the river—we are a huge agricultural area, our river port is one of the busiest on the river. We forget how much our economy and industry depend on the river.”

The River Partnership’s Resource Pool investments have also afforded the foundation an opportunity to be more forward-looking in its grantmaking. Says Hemingway, “This is the first proactive grantmaking program that we’ve ever done. It’s a totally different grant process for us—typically we are reacting to our requests for proposals three times a year. It’s definitely changed the way that my grants committee has looked at grants. It’s given me the chance to go out and look for partners.”

## **Southern Illinois Community Foundation—Marion, Illinois**

*How can a small, start-up foundation use the River Partnership to build internal capacity and grow its endowment? This case study examines how the Southern Illinois Community Foundation used small grants, savvy donor outreach, and partnerships to boost its public visibility and appeal to new donors.*

### **The Context—**

Founded in 2000, the Southern Illinois Community Foundation, like most start ups, has a lot to do on a very small budget. With a volunteer board and a part-time director, the foundation nevertheless serves the 17 southernmost counties in Illinois. Much of the foundation’s resources go into raising operating money and building internal capacity, so the foundation had never really focused on the river until it joined the River Partnership.

“We have 200 miles of the Mississippi and 200 miles of the Ohio,” says Executive Director Pat Bauer. “In so many respects our region is defined by our rivers, yet we never did anything related to the river before joining the River Partnership.” The challenge was to find the right balance for bringing the river into the foundation’s work while also building capacity and financial assets.

### **The Approach—**

The solution was to use a combination of small grants and robust partnerships to build ties to the river. Through the River Partnership’s asset-mapping project, the foundation learned about, and subsequently joined, the Middle Mississippi River Partnership (MMRP), a collection of state, federal, and non-governmental organizations working to restore and enhance the river through public resource management, resource compatible economic development, private lands conservation, education, and outreach. This past summer the foundation hosted a luncheon at MMRP’s annual conference. “Now the river is a signature part of our community foundation,” says Bauer.

Prior to its work with MMRP, the foundation had built a relationship with the city of Cairo, Ill., which is developing a river museum at the confluence of Ohio and Mississippi rivers. Now, the foundation is exploring a partnership with the American Land Conservancy, which could lead to the foundation serving as a conduit for land acquisition along the Ohio and Mississippi.

## **The Results—**

The foundation has been able to parlay these short-term wins into a longer-term fund-raising strategy. Because the foundation covers such a large territory, many donors want to keep their money close to home. To support this, the foundation launched an initiative aimed at creating county-level endowments, which will use investment returns to fund activities within each county. In late 2008, for instance, the foundation launched the River Endowment, a fund that will attract, hold, and direct money to further local, individual community goals aligned with the River Partnership's mission.

“To do funding at the county level, you really have to get close to the ground,” Bauer says. “We have to know people who know people. And the county funds program gets us deep into the community.” Once the foundation has established county-level relationships, it can guide donors toward river-related activities that reflect the mission of the River Partnership. Bauer adds, “We hope that along the river counties—and we will help direct this—that the grants will go to integrate the river into the community.”

## **Cross-Cutting Theme: Increasing Capacity and Inspiring Leadership**

*If River Partnership participants were going to influence how their communities related to the Mississippi and its tributaries, partner foundations needed a deeper understanding of the issues affecting the river—as well as the ability to develop funding strategies, shape public opinion, and mobilize constituents. Consequently, one of the River Partnership’s main goals has been to develop the capacity of participating community foundations to engage in such work.*

### **What the River Partnership Has Done—**

*Knowledge Development: Helped participating foundations develop the content knowledge necessary to design programs and strategies that addressed growth and development on the river.* Using panel discussions, presentations, and facilitated group conversations, the River Partnership helps participants broaden and deepen their knowledge about how environmental, economic, and cultural issues play out along the river. Larry Busch, a board member of the Southern Illinois Community Foundation, points to how his foundation’s involvement with the River Partnership gave him a fuller understanding of how environmental and economic issues dovetailed along the river. “Our conversations about the river have evolved to a place where people can talk effectively about the highest and best uses for the river—that economic development, agriculture, and conservation are all part of the whole.”

*Skill Building: Provided tools, training, and other resources to build the skills of participating community foundations.*

If the River Partnership’s work on knowledge development addresses the content of participants’ work, the Partnership’s focus on skill building has helped them develop concrete tools needed to execute their work. Through presentations, coaching, networking, and sharing best practices, the River Partnership helps participants build their skills in specific areas, including asset identification; community mobilization and convening; building durable partnerships; fund raising (especially around field-of-interest funds); and donor engagement. “I love community leadership and organizing and moving concepts forward—and then handing them off,” says Nancy Van Milligen, president/CEO of the Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque, who organized a much-heralded community-visioning process. “The River Partnership has been a great source of ideas and moral support to try them. The River Partnership provided the frameworks by which they can happen too.”

## How Partner Foundations Have Benefitted—

*By identifying the river-related assets in their communities, participating foundations have become much savvier about how they approach issues and constituents.* For example, when the Central Minnesota Community Foundation wanted to bring policymakers, business leaders, and young professionals together to discuss riverfront development, foundation representatives emphasized the economic benefits, not the environmental issues. “We are focusing on the economic development argument instead of the environment,” says Program Officer Susan Lorenz. “We have a bass fishery up the river that draws several thousand people a year, but where are they? There’s no economic draw for them to come to town. If we are a ‘river city,’ people won’t abuse it. We want to see the urban development happen right.”

*Many River Partnership participants are playing a leadership role in their communities.* Several River Partnership participants discovered that focusing on the river allowed them to initiate broader conversations about the economic, cultural, and environmental future of their respective communities. In so doing, community foundations began moving away from a “transactional” model of doing business—one focused on raising money and catering to donors’ interests—and towards a “transformational” model—one focused on framing issues, mobilizing communities, and exerting leadership. For instance, when floods inundated Iowa in the summer of 2008, The Moline Foundation stepped up to coordinate funding for emergency relief. “Our experience with the flooding has helped re-affirm that we have a necessary leadership place here,” says Executive Director Joy Boruff. “We have been in existence 53 years and I’m the first employee. I think there are some board members that thought that I was just going to pass out money, but the River Partnership has solidified our mission as a catalyst, community leader, and encouraging philanthropy.”

## **The Moline Foundation—Moline, Illinois**

*How and why should a community foundation use its resources to help preserve public land? This case study examines how The Moline Foundation led an effort to preserve a riverside park that was first damaged by floods—and then threatened with commercial development.*

### **The Context—**

The Ben Butterworth Parkway skirts the shores of the Mississippi River for seven miles as it winds its way through Moline, Ill. There's a bike path, picnic spots, a trail extension to Rock Island and the 62-mile Great River Trail, and some of the region's most breathtaking views—which makes it a coveted prize for real estate developers. Meanwhile, because of its proximity to the river, the parkway is prone to flooding, which adds to the public cost since the city has to pay for clean up.

Not surprisingly, the idea of selling the public land pops up with alarming consistency—an idea that Joy Boruff, executive director of The Moline Foundation finds unthinkable. “There’s nothing like this strip of land in the metro area,” she says. “The public has great access now, and we’d like to keep it that way.” The question was how.

### **The Approach—**

In 2006, Boruff approached the director of the Moline Parks and Recreation Department with a novel idea: create an endowment to support the park. As it turned out, Boruff says, “This was something they had been thinking about for a long time but didn’t know about how to go about doing it.”

In partnership with the parks department, the foundation established the Moline Parks & Rivers endowment. The Moline Foundation will use \$5,000 from the River Partnership’s Resource Pool investment to pay for marketing materials and direct mail outreach to potential donors. An avid boater, Boruff went to the city marina, wrote down the slip numbers where the biggest boats were moored, and used public rental records to develop a list of prospective donors. “They want to keep the river as accessible and enjoyable as possible,” she says.

## **The Results—**

Although the endowment campaign is just kicking off, the infrastructure is in place to preserve the park and public access to the river. “This effort is really about protecting community resources,” Boruff explains. “We hope to show that we have enough money that a future city council won’t be tempted to sell off the land.” Although the foundation and its donors don’t own the parkland, Boruff hopes that the showing of public support will make the idea of developing the land politically toxic. “This is really a stopgap to prevent commercial and industrial development on the site.”

The Moline Foundation is now looking to build on its public leadership profile. Over the next year, the foundation will host up to a half-dozen public meetings to discuss how Western Illinois University (WIU) should use a parcel of riverfront property that has been donated to the public university by Deere & Company. The foundation will seek public input through an online survey, focus groups, and public meetings. Says Boruff, “We want to look at the full range of recreational, cultural, and arts activities that could be developed in cooperation with WIU and its public/private partnership with the city’s local economic development group, Renew Moline.”

## **Community Foundation of the Great River Bend—Bettendorf, Iowa**

*How does an established community foundation stake out a leadership position on environmental issues when it doesn't have an environmental program? This case study illustrates how the Community Foundation of the Great River Bend used strategic grantmaking and a close partnership with an environmental advocacy organization to establish its leadership bona fides.*

### **The Context—**

Like many community foundations, the Community Foundation of the Great River Bend has a significant portion of its assets tied up in restricted funds. While the foundation's assets had grown from just over \$20 million in 2003 to over \$50 million in 2007, Matt Mendenhall, director of regional programs, says that the board was looking for ways to do more “proactive, strategic grantmaking,” especially in the environmental field. “Environmental grants were part of the portfolio for designated funds, but not on the discretionary side,” Mendenhall says. The challenge, he continues, was to find a way to do proactive grantmaking while simultaneously building the foundation's capacity to address environmental issues.

### **The Approach—**

As it happened, the River Partnership offered Mendenhall and his colleagues precisely the tools they needed to get started—a one-stop shop for knowledge, partners, and funding. “The one thing our board really liked about getting involved with the River Partnership was the emphasis it placed on strong partnerships, both locally and nationally,” Mendenhall says. Being connected to national partners, Mendenhall continues, allowed the foundation to learn from others, adapting proven ideas and implementing time-tested solutions. “We don't have to do all the work because so much of it has been done before,” he says.

Asset mapping, for instance, proved to be the foundation's principal catalyst, helping it to identify a key local partner. When the foundation started its mapping process, one of the first organizations it turned to was River Action, a local nonprofit dedicated to fostering the economic, cultural, and environmental vitality of the Mississippi River. River Action had recently completed its own asset mapping exercise, and the foundation was able to piggyback on that knowledge. “This just sort of

fell into our lap,” Mendenhall recalls. “They sent a 20-page document that had all the information we needed.”

### **The Result—**

The foundation and River Action have since gone on to form a close partnership. First, the foundation put up \$2,500 to support a River Action study of the region’s watershed. Next, the foundation used an investment from the River Partnership to support the Upper Mississippi River Conference, a two-day symposium held in the summer of 2008, which focused on riverfront design, recreation, and the environment. Sponsored by River Action, with support from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and U.S. Coast Guard, the conference drew over 200 city planners, elected officials, landscape architects, architects, environmental groups, economic developers, environmental educators, and professionals. Featured panels included Natural Resources and Environmental Planning, River Recreation Opportunities and How They Are Realized, and Urban Waterfront Needs in the Ecological City.

By all accounts, the conference was a success. The Land and Water field trip was so popular that River Action is now offering it as part of its summer public education series. Meanwhile, a post-conference survey showed that attendees had benefitted from the networking opportunities, professional continuing education credits, and in-depth presentations. The partners are already making plans for the second annual Upper Mississippi River Conference to be held in September 2009.

The foundation is also exploring ways it could support River Action’s “rain garden” program, which seeks to protect the watershed by using landscaping to promote the absorption and infiltration of storm-water runoff. Meanwhile, River Action is thinking about starting an endowment at the community foundation. Says Mendenhall, “River Action has the same idea that the River Partnership does about integrating the social, economic, and environmental elements of the river. My goal is to help them figure out how this goes forward.”

## **Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque—Dubuque, Iowa**

*How does a start-up community foundation gain the trust needed to grow, thrive, and lead? This case study looks at how the Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque used a community visioning process to establish leadership credentials and grow its assets from \$1 million to \$12 million in just five years.*

### **The Context—**

When the Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque opened its doors for business on February 1, 2003, the foundation's new board was still feeling its way. "The board was new and we didn't fully understand at the time the depth and breadth of the work that community foundations do," recalls President/CEO Nancy Van Milligen. "There was more of a sense that we were like a bank for nonprofits or a philanthropic support group. We hadn't really thought about community leadership or how to raise funds for specific purposes."

In 2005, the foundation would receive a crash course in foundation leadership when it was invited to join the River Partnership of Community Foundations. At the Partnership's first exploratory conversation in April 2005 in New Orleans, the conversation turned to how community foundations could lead civic conversations about land use, planning, and economic development—and Van Milligen realized that this was precisely what her foundation needed to do. "I had been toying with how our community foundation could lead a community-wide visioning process to raise our credibility, and this was just the push I needed," she says.

### **The Approach—**

In 2005, the foundation partnered with the Dubuque Chamber of Commerce to launch ENVIS10N 2010, a community visioning process that aimed to flesh out the ten best community projects for making Dubuque a better place to live, work, and play. Nearly 500 people attended the kick off breakfast, where they received visioning toolkits. Over the next 18 months, informal groups met regularly to plan and discuss their ideas. For Van Milligen and her colleague Steward Sandstrom, former director of the Chamber of Commerce, who co-chaired a nine-person steering committee, the key to ENVIS10N's success was to focus on implementation. "We spent three months planning," Van Milligen recalls. "The rest of the year was convening and marketing."

As the process wound down, a selection committee, chosen for its diversity, vetted the 100 best ideas from a list of 2,300 ideas. They presented them at a town meeting, where 300 attendees voted on their favorite ideas, narrowing the list to 30. Based on these recommendations, the selection committee chose the top ten, which were then handed over to the community. Ideas included an integrated hiking/biking trail, expanded mental health and substance abuse services, a community health center, and a riverfront redevelopment. “It was really satisfying to hand over the baton,” Van Milligen says.

### **The Results—**

The results have been better than anyone could have hoped for. All ten ideas are moving forward. The Crescent Community Health Center is open for business, and when the National Civic League selected Dubuque as an All-America City, the awards committee cited ENVIS10N as one of the reasons. Just as important, the visioning process established the foundation as a community leader. “It allowed us to understand the potential that we have as a community leader,” Van Milligen says. “It has put us at tables that we wouldn’t have been invited to before.”

It has also helped with fund raising. By 2007, foundation assets had reached almost \$13 million, up from just under \$1 million in 2003. In 2008, the foundation became the home for two new endowments to support organizations that focus on the Mississippi River. The National Mississippi River Museum and Aquarium is committed to raising \$5 million in endowed funds as part of its capital campaign. Meanwhile, the Mississippi River Parkway Commission has turned to Van Milligen and her colleagues to house an endowment and fundraise nationally.

“My board sometimes struggles with the fact that we appear to be stretched thin,” Van Milligen says. “But I keep going back to a bicycle analogy: One wheel is the programs and community leadership, the other is the financial assets. One fuels the other. If we aren’t exhibiting community leadership, we aren’t relevant. As long as the financial assets are growing (the front wheel), it is our charge to keep turning the community knowledge/leadership (the back wheel).”

## Cross-Cutting Theme: Creating Strong Relationships

*The vision of the River Partnership is that community foundations in the Mississippi River Corridor will work together to ensure that the Mississippi River and its tributaries are honored, shared resources that are vital, healthy, attractive, fun, and prosperous. Since collaboration and partnership are defining features of this vision, nearly every aspect of the River Partnership’s work supports this goal in one way or another. As relationships among participants have grown and developed, working partnerships have emerged around knowledge-sharing, project-level collaborations, and regional work.*

### What the River Partnership Has Done—

*Through its various activities, the River Partnership has become a platform for participating foundations to share ideas, develop relationships, and explore working together.* Several participants underscored how the River Partnership has instilled a sense of camaraderie and connection among participating foundations that had not existed before. “I think this is the first step in reclaiming the river as the ‘fourth coast’ and holding it up for the national treasure that it really is,” says Carrie Jo Short of The Saint Paul Foundation. “I think the community foundations that have come together can claim it as much as anyone else can. I would like for our group to be the one that says, ‘We’re the ones that are going to take this to the next level.’”

### How Partner Foundations Have Benefitted—

*The River Partnership has helped catalyze a range of partnerships among participating foundations. Broadly speaking, these partnerships fall into three categories—knowledge-sharing partnerships, project partnerships, and regional partnerships—although the boundaries between the categories are often blurry.*

- **Knowledge-sharing partnerships.** Typically ad hoc and informal, knowledge-sharing partnerships emphasize the exchange of ideas, insights, and strategies. For example, when the Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque was developing ENVIS10N, Nancy Van Milligen, the foundation’s president and CEO, took community leaders to St. Paul for a site visit to learn about riverfront redevelopment that The Saint Paul Foundation had supported. Later, Van

Milligen was the featured speaker on a conference call during which Don Hickman of the Initiative Foundation and St. Cloud city officials discussed the city's redevelopment plans. Likewise, when Peggy Linton of the Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi needed advice on how to deal with her local levee board, she reached out to Marco Cocito-Monoc of The Greater New Orleans Foundation.

- **Project partnerships.** In several instances, community foundations have collaborated on concrete projects. The Initiative Foundation and the Central Minnesota Community Foundation, for instance, worked closely on a community visioning process that was initiated by the Central Minnesota Community Foundation. "The biggest benefit of the River Partnership has been to bring these two organizations together," says Don Hickman. "We seldom met before, but now we are doing a lot together, especially related to the river." Meanwhile, The Minneapolis Foundation and The Saint Paul Foundation have both joined Central Corridor Funders Collaborative and Learning Network, a partnership of ten foundations working to maximize community benefits for a new light rail system in the Twin Cities.
- **Regional partnerships.** Several regional partnerships are starting to emerge, although most are in their nascent "talking" stages. The Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi, for instance, is talking with the Community Foundation of Greater Memphis about regional issues and funding opportunities. "I've been drawing strength from seeing what other people are doing," says Peggy Linton. "We talk more and more about regionalism. This is the only coalition that we are actively a part of that really reflects this."

## **St. Croix Valley Community Foundation—Hudson, Wisconsin**

*How does a foundation that focuses on the arts and social services also emphasize the environment and the Mississippi River? This case study explores how the St. Croix Valley Community Foundation used the arts as a way to underscore the region's "sense of place."*

### **The Context—**

In its early years, the St. Croix Valley Community Foundation, which was founded in 1995, embarked on several environmental projects including a Conservation Assessment of the Lower St. Croix River, in hope of building an environmental field of interest fund to launch the foundation's first grant program. As a new and emerging foundation, however, the board soon grew wary that too many donors perceived it as an environmental foundation. So the board pulled back from environmental issues and instead focused more broadly on issues related to rapid growth in the St. Croix Valley. The foundation also focused on building donor-advised funds and, with support from the Wisconsin State Arts Board, emphasized funding for the arts.

By the time the foundation was invited to join the River Partnership in 2005, its assets had grown to \$7.4 million, but little of it was directed to the environment. Grants from 79 percent of the foundation's assets were directed by donor-advisors, agencies, or communities. Of the foundation's own grant programs, 74 percent of annual giving went to support arts and music in the valley. With a \$77,000 annual budget for discretionary grantmaking, the challenge was to find a way to integrate the environment and the river into the foundation's existing program areas.

### **The Approach—**

With a modest investment from the River Partnership in 2007, the foundation expanded its "Bench Project"—a community-arts initiative that brings together local artists and young people—to focus more explicitly on expressing a "sense of place" tied to the river. In Prescott, Wis., for instance, mosaic artist John Turula worked with 20 girls from the Helping Hands 4H Club to design and create a colorful bench at Freedom Park, a Great River Road Visitor and Learning Center located at the confluence of the St. Croix and Mississippi Rivers. All together, the Bench Project has placed benches in five sites so far. In the coming months, the project aims to place five or six more.

“This project is great because each bench is both a product—a unique work of art that reflects the community that produced it—and a process—a way to stimulate civic engagement and express an understanding of a specific place,” says Jill Shannon, director of community partnerships. As part of the Prescott bench, for example, young people learned about the migration of monarch butterflies, how Dakota Indians regard local plants, and how bald eagles build their nests.

“As a regional project, the Bench Project is designed to draw residents and visitors to our region’s rich natural offerings,” notes Shannon. “In time, we intend to create signage and a single marketing piece to promote this community art project throughout the region.”

### **The Results—**

Although the Bench Project was a relatively small initiative, it nevertheless helped establish the foundation’s leadership credentials. “The foundation is definitely seen as more of a player now,” Shannon says. “You can’t attribute all of that to the River Partnership, but the seed money did allow us to devote attention to the river in a way we couldn’t have done otherwise.”

The foundation has subsequently expanded its work in support of “place,” a notion that ties together arts, community, the economy, and the river valley’s natural environment. In 2007, the National Park Service opened a \$3 million field-of-interest fund, which will support the health of the river. With this fund as an anchor, the Foundation is also considering how to market it and a broader “family of funds” to donors who care about the river. “We talk about the character of our region, but in my heart and mind, the river is really the key ingredient,” Shannon says. “The other day, I found myself thinking, ‘I should give money to the Park Service’—because it’s about the river! I wasn’t even thinking about giving money to the foundation. It’s all about preserving the natural scenic beauty this river valley offers.”

## **The Saint Paul Foundation/Minnesota Community Foundation—St. Paul, Minnesota**

*How can participating in a funder partnership influence a foundation's strategic direction? This case study examines how The Saint Paul Foundation's participation in the River Partnership helped the foundation clarify the role partnerships should play in the foundation's strategic direction.*

### **The Context—**

When Carleen Rhodes, CEO of The Saint Paul Foundation, launched a strategic planning process in 2008, she urged the staff and board to reassess the foundation's priorities and program areas. Although Rhodes was supportive of the River Partnership's work, Carrie Jo Short, a senior program officer who participated in the River Partnership, saw the strategic planning process as an opportunity to clarify the value that partnerships bring to the foundation's work. "One of the things that has emerged in our strategic planning process over the past year is that partnership opportunities like this one come up and we decide whether to participate or not, but we don't articulate what that means," Short says. "We needed to better define partnership as 'how we do our business.'" For Short—and the foundation—the challenge lay in articulating the value of partnership and a decision framework for when to engage or not in partnership opportunities.

### **The Approach—**

The tools and relationships Short gained through participation in the River Partnership helped clarify two key strategic questions. The first was, "What makes a worthwhile partnership?" The second was, "How can strategic participation in partnerships support The Saint Paul Foundation's overall mission?"

In strategic planning meetings, Short was able to identify how the River Partnership strengthened her overall work. "The credibility associated with being connected to a national partnership reflects positively on the foundation," she recalls. (Conversely, having a large community foundation like The Saint Paul Foundation involved brought credibility to the River Partnership.) The River Partnership has allowed her to be more collaborative. "The informal networks that have evolved through the River Partnership are fantastic. There is such a breadth of colleagues who care about what I care about—and they are trying to affect their communities in really creative ways, especially in Minnesota. I talk with regional and national colleagues much more often than I ever did before."

### **The Results—**

The Saint Paul Foundation is more clear about when and why to engage in strategic partnerships.

“One thing that’s changed for us is that we now have a vision statement that mentions partnership—that is a tangible change in how we do our business,” Short says. The Saint Paul Foundation has subsequently partnered with other foundations to create the Central Corridor Funders Collaborative and Learning Network, a network of 11 local and national foundations committed to collaborative funding and learning in support of transit-oriented development around a new \$915 million light rail system that will connect Minneapolis and St. Paul.

“Partnership is now embedded in our strategic vision,” Short says. “Our new strategic plan says we are working together in three important ways, and partnering with others who share our vision is one of them.”

## **Cross-Cutting Theme: Building Foundation Assets and Bolstering Leadership Capacity**

### **Building Financial Assets—**

*If one of the River Partnership’s desired long-term goals is for participating foundations to financially support the Partnership’s mission and vision, foundations needed tools and strategies to help build their asset bases—and to increase the river’s share of local grantmaking. Two themes have emerged in this area. First, there seems to be a correlation between participating foundations taking a greater leadership role and their ability to build their asset bases. Second, the River Partnership Resource Pool has been a vital source of entrepreneurial grantmaking capital, particularly for foundations with limited discretionary funds.*

### **What the River Partnership Has Done—**

*The modest investments available through the River Partnership Resource Pool have helped participating foundations experiment with new ideas and develop partnerships that would otherwise have been impossible.* Several foundations underscored how the Resource Pool investments they received through the River Partnership have allowed them to take their work to a new level. Matt Mendenhall of the Community Foundation of the Great River Bend notes, for example, how his foundation’s \$10,000 Resource Pool investment in 2008 helped the foundation develop its partnership with River Action, Inc., a local conservation nonprofit. “I didn’t know much about them at first,” Mendenhall explains. “But I called them to talk about the grant opportunity and I recommended them for the Resource Pool grant. They’ve been around for 24 years, working on the Iowa and Illinois side of the river, so they have incredible connections and programs and networks that we hadn’t tapped into before.”

*The River Partnership also provided tools and strategies for educating donors about the river’s role in the environmental, cultural, and economic life of communities.* Staff members of several participating foundations, for instance, noted that the River Partnership has helped them create more expansive models of foundation leadership. Jill Shannon of the St. Croix Valley Community Foundation used part of her foundation’s Resource Pool grant to underwrite a needs assessment for a consortium of local arts organizations that were considering a joint real estate acquisition. “I’m using river monies to be a contribution to that,” Shannon says. “If that goes through, it is as much about the river because it’s all about sense of place for this town. There are artists, the climate, and the culture of this region. Donors respond to that.”

## How Partner Foundations Have Benefitted—

Several partner foundations have made great strides in attracting endowment funds—particularly foundations that have taken a larger leadership role in their communities. In the five years since launching ENVIS10N, a community visioning process that aimed to flesh out the ten best community projects for making Dubuque, Iowa, a better place to live, work, and play, the Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque, has grown its assets from \$1 million to \$12 million, attracting river-related endowment funds from the Mississippi River Parkway Commission and the Dubuque Historical Society’s River Museum, among others. “The Resource Pool funds elicit amazing results,” says Nancy Van Milligen, the foundation’s president/CEO. “By sharing our endowment building know-how and using the Resource Pool funds to provide marketing assistance, we have built strong partnerships with River organizations while growing their endowments.” Plans for new endowments are also underway at several other community foundations.

Likewise, several partners have created new field-of-interest funds, some of which were seeded with Resource Pool grants. The largest fund, by far, is at the St. Croix Valley Community Foundation, where the National Park Service (NPS) has created a \$3 million fund. For now, says Jill Shannon of the St. Croix Valley Community Foundation, NPS is operating it like a donor-advised fund, but foundation representatives hope to persuade NPS to do much more than grant administration. “One option we’re exploring is to co-market with NPS, promoting the NPS and the foundation together and giving to this fund and to the river and to the health of the river. The second option is creating a ‘river family of funds’ which would position the foundation as a vehicle for giving to the river—the NPS fund, the St. Croix Association, the local nature center.”

## **Central Minnesota Community Foundation—St. Cloud, Minnesota**

*How can the city of St. Cloud and the surrounding area take advantage of its location on the Mississippi River to become a stronger, more vibrant community? This case study looks at how the Central Minnesota Community Foundation, which is based in St. Cloud, is helping the community maximize the economic impact of over \$700 million in river-related investments in the region—while also strengthening the foundation’s reputation for strong leadership.*

### **The Context—**

When the Central Minnesota Community Foundation (CMCF) conducted an asset-mapping exercise that was required by the River Partnership, foundation staff members realized that there was over \$700 million of development planned for areas adjacent to the Mississippi River in and around St. Cloud. Yet there was no coherent plan to link it all together so that the total result was more than just the sum of its parts.

“St. Cloud has a lot going for it,” says Susan Lorenz, program officer. “It’s right on the Mississippi, which is calm and narrow in these parts. We’ve got a vibrant arts district three blocks off the water, and St. Cloud State University is right on the water. Both are river-related assets. We realized that if we were able to pull all these pieces together, we had an opportunity to become a destination for young, creative professionals—precisely the kind of people who we have been unable to keep here.” The challenge was how to get policymakers, the public, artists, and young professionals to see the assets they had before their very eyes.

### **The Approach—**

In June of 2008, CMCF launched “Rediscovering the River,” a four-part workshop that brought together business leaders, policymakers, nonprofit leaders, and citizens to identify ways to maximize the river as an environmental, community, and economic resource. The first meeting examined how a similar visioning process in Dubuque, Iowa, (co-chaired by the Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque) had revived the city’s sputtering economy, bringing 4,500 new jobs to the community in just five years. (In 2006, Lorenz had attended a River Partnership meeting in Dubuque, so she was familiar with the community’s story and its leaders.) The second “Rediscovering the River” meeting highlighted the St. Cloud region’s environmental assets, including a bass fishery and a diverse mussel

population. The third meeting highlighted \$725 million in development projects that were planned or already underway. The fourth meeting was a Saturday morning workshop concentrating on what community members could do collectively to make St. Cloud a vibrant river city.

Co-hosted with the foundation's Emerging Leaders Forum (a giving circle of young professionals), the environmental nonprofit Minnesota Waters, and Mississippi River Connections (a civic association), one of the principal goals of "Rediscovering the River" was to build support for public investments in riverfront development. Developing a comprehensive plan, for instance, would likely require public officials to buy out private landowners and show some creativity in land-use policy—something they are unlikely to do without broad public support. "The convenings are really a way of getting everyone to play together," Lorenz notes.

### **The Results**

Although it's too early to tell what will come from the visioning process, CMCF and its partners have already succeeded in getting policymakers, business leaders, and the public to understand how the region benefits from the river—and how modest public investments could leverage that asset. "If we don't connect all this—the \$700 million in investments, the arts community, the river's natural heritage—then we will have missed a golden opportunity," Lorenz says.

"We're spending a bit of social capital on this as an institution, but we think it's worth it," Lorenz continues. "Seven-hundred million dollars is a real driver!" The economy, she notes, is increasingly being driven by people who care about quality of life amenities like hiking trails, restaurants, and galleries. "Economic development isn't about getting the next factory here. It's about connecting the arts district and downtown development to the river. If you have things that attract the 'creative class,' the other things follow. What we're saying is that we've got those things already—we just need to make them more accessible by linking them more tightly."

## **Initiative Foundation—Little Falls, Minnesota**

*How does a regional foundation take a successful environmental program and expand it statewide? This case study examines how the Initiative Foundation, a small community foundation based in central Minnesota, used the relationships it developed in the River Partnership to take its Healthy Lakes & River's Initiative to the next level.*

### **The Context—**

In 1999, the Initiative Foundation launched the Healthy Lakes & Rivers Partnership (HLRP), a program that aimed to help local citizens play a more active role in improving water quality and managing water resources—tasks typically left to state agencies. Each year, the Initiative Foundation recruits up to eight citizen associations—usually owners of lakefront or riverfront property—who participate in a two-day training session before returning to their communities to develop a water management plan in consultation with their neighbors. Over the years, the HLRP has distributed over \$650,000 to nearly 200 organizations, which have implemented a range of projects: inspecting septic systems, managing invasive exotic aquatic plants, restoring native shorelines, improving feedlots, and protecting fish and wildlife habitat.

In the River Partnership, the Initiative Foundation saw an opportunity to expand HLRP beyond its original 14-county region. “For better or for worse, most land-use decisions are made locally,” says Don Hickman, program director for planning and preservation. “And through the Healthy Lakes & Rivers Partnership, we’ve shown how communities can make informed, good decisions. Few of us want to be told what do to, but when given the tools, information, and resources to be good stewards we usually are!” The challenge was how to do it.

### **The Approach—**

Hickman realized that that River Partnership of Community Foundations offered a ready-made network of peers who could help the Initiative Foundation develop relationships with local communities as it expanded the Healthy Lakes & Rivers Partnership. Hickman set about reaching out to his regional colleagues who also were involved in the River Partnership—Susan Lorenz and Glen Tautges of the Central Minnesota Community Foundation; Carrie Jo Short at The Saint Paul Foundation; and Jill Shannon of the St. Croix Valley Community Foundation.

These relationships have opened up new vistas of possibility, Hickman says. “The greatest value to us is to have these inter-foundation relationships between community foundations. Barely a month goes by that we don’t talk. What’s most different for us is that we now routinely say, ‘Are there other RP colleagues that we could partner on this? How can we add value to their work, avoid duplication, and work together?’” In March 2008, for instance, the Initiative Foundation partnered with the Central Minnesota Community Foundation to host a planning event on community design for active living.

### **The Results—**

In the fall of 2008, the Initiative Foundation and Minnesota Waters, a statewide nonprofit that promotes good stewardship of water resources, launched a pilot HLRP program in the Minnehaha Watershed District in the western suburbs of Minneapolis. A modest investment from the River Partnership Resource Pool is also providing the financial resources to seed HLRP community projects as the foundation expands its work statewide along the Mississippi. Projects may include: natural resource inventories; downtown revitalization plans that encourage river-sensitive development; establishment of on-site storm water management/rain gardens; support for farmers’ markets to draw pedestrian traffic to the riverfront (and support locally-grown foods); design of parks, trails, or open space along the river corridor; and public input for comprehensive plans and ordinances to encourage conservation design in new or redeveloped residential areas.

“One of the great things about the River Partnership is that it fills several needs at once,” Hickman says. “We have a network of partners, which will help us gain footholds in local communities as we expand our work statewide. Then the Resource Pool gives us seed money for innovative projects. But the greatest value is just sharing stories from other regions. Everyone can relate when we talk about community revitalization based on the river.”

## Conclusion

After just three years as a formal partnership, it's too soon to quantify precisely how the members of the River Partnership have helped improve the environmental, economic, and cultural vitality of the communities along the Mississippi River and its tributaries. But the anecdotal and qualitative indicators of progress are manifold.

One of the most striking features of the River Partnership's impact thus far is the extent to which participating community foundations have found the right entry points and issue frames to engage their respective communities in a conversation about the river's environmental, economic, and cultural importance to the local area. In Arkansas, New Orleans, Moline, and Central Minnesota, economic development has been the hook for a broader conversation about preserving and protecting the river as a natural resource and cultural feature. Likewise, community foundations in Owensboro, Dubuque, and St. Cloud have focused on riverfront development and environmental preservation as key components of sustainable cultural and economic growth. And in Hernando and Memphis, greenways have emerged as tangible project for organizing public and private resources in support of river resources.

The River Partnership—and the learning and support network it embodies—have been an indispensable part of members' successes. As Joanne Walz of The Minneapolis Foundation puts it, “The River Partnership meetings have given me a much greater understanding of what it happening, a much better sense of how specific community foundations are using an economic development lens to engage people.” By giving participating foundations an array of leadership tools, intellectual resources, and conceptual frameworks, the River Partnership has helped foundations feel comfortable moving into more substantive leadership roles.

And it is this convening role that the true value of the River Partnership obtains. “All the meetings, and hearing the dialogue, have sparked so many ideas for me,” says Pam Coaxum, board president of the Greater East St. Louis Community Fund in East St. Louis, Ill. “We typically undervalue the power of a forum. There are very few trusted environments for community foundations to talk. The River Partnership has created an environment for learning.” Yet, three years in, these relationships and on-the-ground projects are just taking root. They will only grow stronger with time, tending, and continued commitment.

## Appendix A – Interviewees

1. Patricia Bauer, President, Southern Illinois Community Foundation
2. Joy Boruff, Executive Director, The Moline Foundation
3. W. Larry Busch, Trustee, Southern Illinois Community Foundation
4. Pamela Coaxum, Trustee, Greater East St. Louis Community Fund
5. Marco Cocito-Monoc, Director of Regional Initiatives, The Greater New Orleans Foundation,
6. Sara Hemingway, Executive Director, The Community Foundation of Owensboro-Daviess County
7. Don Hickman, Program Manager for Planning & Preservation, Initiative Foundation
8. Judi Holdorf, Executive Director, Community Foundation of Greater Muscatine
9. Peggy Linton, Community Development Director, Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi
10. Susan Lorenz, Program Officer, Central Minnesota Community Foundation
11. Matt Mendenhall, Director of Regional Programs, Community Foundation of the Great River Bend
12. Cecilia Patterson, Program Director, Arkansas Community Foundation
13. Jill Shannon, Director of Community Partnerships, St. Croix Valley Community Foundation
14. Carrie Jo Short, Senior Program Officer, The Saint Paul Foundation
15. Nancy Van Milligen, President/CEO, Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque
16. Joanne Walz, Community Philanthropy Officer, The Minneapolis Foundation
17. Melissa Wolowicz, Director of Grants and Initiatives, Community Foundation of Greater Memphis

## **Appendix B – River Partnership of Community Foundations Participants**

*(as of June 2009)*

### From the Gulf to the Headwaters:

1. The Greater New Orleans Foundation (New Orleans, La.)
2. Arkansas Community Foundation (Little Rock, Ark.)
3. Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi (Hernando, Miss.)
4. Community Foundation of Greater Memphis (Memphis, Tenn.)
5. The Community Foundation of Owensboro-Daviess County (Owensboro, Ky.)
6. Southern Illinois Community Foundation (Marion, Ill.)
7. Greater East St. Louis Community Fund (East St. Louis, Ill.)
8. Greater Saint Louis Community Foundation (St. Louis, Mo.)
9. Community Foundation of Greater Muscatine (Muscatine, Iowa)
10. The Moline Foundation (Moline, Ill.)
11. Community Foundation of the Great River Bend (Bettendorf, Iowa)
12. Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque (Dubuque, Iowa)
13. St. Croix Valley Community Foundation (Hudson, Wis.)
14. Minnesota Community Foundation (St. Paul, Minn.)
15. The Saint Paul Foundation (St. Paul, Minn.)
16. The Minneapolis Foundation (Minneapolis, Minn.)
17. Central Minnesota Community Foundation (St. Cloud, Minn.)
18. Initiative Foundation (Little Falls, Minn.)