

Vision shapes economic fund: Chairman to pass torch after guiding \$30 million into new regional effort

Paula Schleis

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Rob Briggs remembers 2002, when his GAR Foundation started getting "pounded" by economic development groups asking for grants.

Foundations didn't traditionally support such efforts, but Briggs began thinking maybe they should.

He found like-minded peers at the Cleveland Foundation, who agreed that, "Yeah, this isn't our work, this isn't our business, but by golly, nobody else is doing it," Briggs said.

A year and a half later, the Fund for Our Economic Future was born.

The collaboration of area philanthropic organizations -- numbering more than 100 now -- has funneled \$30 million into economic development organizations that are widely accepted as the architects of Northeast Ohio's new economy.

Next month, Briggs will step down as the fund's chairman, saying it's time for another to lead the four-year-old initiative. His successor will be elected at the group's March 4 meeting.

Briggs, 66, will continue to represent the Akron-based GAR Foundation, where he is president, as a voting member of the fund.

"I'm ready to go anywhere to raise money and preach the gospel," he said.

The new chairman will inherit a well-oiled trust that already has nearly \$30 million in new pledges for an action-oriented phase that began last year.

This phase, called Advance Northeast Ohio, awards grants to organizations that are carrying out directives that resulted from the first phase -- a series of Voices & Choices town hall meetings in 2006.

Briggs said the fund had to invent its own process.

"There was no other model. We created our own," Briggs said. "It was a high-risk thing for the foundation community to do that."

Briggs' choice as the fund's first chairman was partly political.

Organizers expected resistance from foundations outside Cuyahoga County if the group looked too Cleveland-centric. Briggs -- a Wayne County native leading a Summit County foundation -- would carry the message that this unlikely partnership was truly regional.

But Lud Huck, chairman of the Wayne Growth Partnership in Wayne County (another fund partner), said Briggs brought much more than geography to the table.

Huck called him a visionary, someone with "complete belief in what is possible."

That was vital for getting philanthropic groups to break out of old molds.

Denise Zeman is president of Saint Luke's Foundation in Cleveland, which focuses on health care and human resources. Through the work of the fund, she said, Saint Luke's better understands how it is affected by the general health of the economy.

"We care very much about access to health care. Most people access health insurance through their job. No job, no health insurance, no access," she said.

And Briggs played a big role in opening their eyes to the wisdom of approaching economic development on a regional basis, she said.

"Rob was the perfect leader at the perfect time for this initiative," she said. "He's probably one of the nicest human beings I've ever met. He engages people in a very genuine way."

Zeman said Briggs set the bar "very high" and that the fund's new leader will have his or her hands full.

"When something is new, it's sometimes easy to be enthusiastic. When you get into the work, the work is hard and takes a lot of effort," she said.

Huck said Briggs' successor will have the benefit of momentum. "The advice I would give is to keep stoking the fires of the vision," Huck said. "We all need to keep passionately supporting it."

He also hopes the next fund chairman will continue to be as open as Briggs has been to looking for partners and forming coalitions.

"The agenda the fund has put together with the input of Northeast Ohio is a very strong agenda," Huck said, "but it is so broad and involves so many specialties that we need partnerships. We can't do it alone by any stretch of the imagination."

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