



A Countywide Non-profit Call to Action

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The current difficult economic times present a unique challenge and opportunity to the once growing non-profit industry in Columbia County. Non-profit organizations which comprise social service organizations, hospitals, arts and cultural institutions have been hard hit from every traditional revenue stream imaginable including individuals, foundations, corporate, government, endowment income, events, and what ever is left. Throw in a liquidity crisis and those organizations with reserves, cash on hand, and tried and true business models will be most likely to survive over the next few years. However, perhaps it is not too soon to accept a new non-profit reality in order to envision and plan how specific non-profits and the sector should react to a fundamentally altered city, county, state and national landscape.

There are several ways the industry will or could shake out over the next several years, given varying degrees of design and intervention. First, county non-profit, government and corporate leaders can take a Darwinian approach and let the strong, lucky, or extremely well managed mission focused organizations survive. Second, non profit leaders or foundations can encourage and perhaps fund practical ways to collaborate in terms of programs, staff, mission, and back office operations, the driving force being expense reductions. A Program and Back Office speed dating service of sorts might facilitate such collaborations. Third, a more mission driven strategic approach, would be for the non-profit, business and government leadership to define an end game, and determine which missions and organizations need to remain and continue to be strong.

Such non-profit sector re-engineering might take the form of restructuring of existing organizations, establishing companies focused on specific missions, bundling like minded projects, and moving away from the small holding company business model of an organization trying to do too many things. For example, The Columbia County Historical Society wants to connect with smaller historical societies in a way to benefit all. We'd also like to work more closely with larger organizations like Lindenwald who to their big picture credit are also exploring greater collaboration. It may sound like centralized planning, but ultimately this is an intervention meant to rationalize and strengthen the local industry in the long term. Another consideration is to take advantage of and grow advisory or consulting services, similar to The Berkshire Taconic Foundation's Center for Non-Profit Excellence.

Regardless of how this is approached, there are advantages to building organizational, financial and programmatic critical mass to break through barriers inhibiting growth. Smaller organizations cannot afford the following: a) A Development Director or consultant who can advise on effective strategies given the organization's story and resources b) a sustained marketing effort which tells the right story to the right constituency inside the county and out and c) Strategic and practical use of Information Technology which would include building and using the website. For example, The



Historical Society prints an amazing magazine, “Columbia County History and Heritage” that would benefit from exposure to regions beyond the County.

However, most importantly, limited resources limit institutional leadership. Strong leadership at the staff level responsible for defining the organizational vision and pushing it forward is critical to long term organizational success. It is expensive relative to the organizational budget, especially for smaller organizations, to get the right leaders, and it can be further complicated by limited Board enthusiasm to assume additional financial risk despite the prospect of greater organizational return.

The ultimate outcome will be larger non-profit organizations in the county, each with the potential and drive to grow. Such managed growth, spinning smaller non-profits into larger ones, will provide the non-profit critical mass to re-shape the industry in Columbia County and position itself to take advantage of better times ahead. The larger organizations, with greater staff capacity may also be more appealing to the outside foundation, corporate, and individual giving world, even those outside county limits. Funders want to give to viable organizations that will be part of the fabric of the community for a while to come.

There are any number of methods to bring the non-profit industry sector and their government and business partners together. Ultimately, a Non-Profit Growth Task Force might set the right path to success. The process won't be easy as financial records will have to be shared, management assessed, and Boards redefined and reconfigured. However, there is a greater non-profit and county good out there if leaders think proactively instead of reactively in these challenging times where every option is on the table.

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