

Healthy Environment Design Process

Highlights of Stakeholder Engagement



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MEMORIAL TRUST

HEALTHY
ENVIRONMENT

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September 2015

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Highlights from Stakeholder Engagement

Through nine listening sessions, nearly two dozen interviews and an online survey, Meyer Memorial Trust collected opinions, ideas and insights from hundreds of stakeholders across the state regarding the scope and framing of the Healthy Environment Portfolio. More than 250 stakeholders responded to an online survey and over 100 content experts and community leaders participated in listening sessions across the state. This memo summarizes key issues, questions and priorities that emerged from this stakeholder engagement process.

The state of the environment in Oregon

Stakeholders were asked about the **greatest needs, opportunities and challenges** in fostering a “healthy environment” in Oregon. The most common themes, addressing environmental and conservation issues as well as equity concerns, were:

- **Climate change** sets the context for changes in the natural system, writ large. Shifts in climate are causing significant changes in water regimes, fire regimes, the success of invasive species, agricultural pests and habitat and species decline.
- **Demographic shifts** – including population growth in population centers, “youth drain” in remote communities and greater diversity in communities across the state – are driving changes in the human ecosystem. Population pressures, with in-migration exacerbated by drought elsewhere, pose threats to Oregon’s natural resource base (as in, greater demand for land and water) and even to its nationally renowned land use laws; in emergent cities like Bend, Medford, Ashland and Hood River, as well as in Eugene and the Portland metro area, these issues are particularly pressing. Stakeholders identified a need to foster urban resilience and community livability; planned growth must factor in housing affordability, energy costs and waste reduction as well as transportation and transit. Oregonians bring diverse cultural relationships with land and nature. Newcomers may lack the personal connection to the state’s natural heritage. The challenge *and* opportunity for conservation organizations is to reflect and remain relevant to a variety of needs and values.
- **Historic disparities** in access to environmental benefits and in shouldering environmental burdens have compounded community impoverishment (financial, social, physical and spiritual) and diminished community health across the state. This is true not just in urban settings, where bad air quality has been tied to higher asthma and cancer rates among low-income people living in proximity to highways, but in rural communities where agricultural workers are exposed to chemicals. The people who bear the brunt of short-sighted environmental decision-making – people with low incomes, immigrants, communities of color – generally remain marginalized from such decision-making.
- **Rural economies** inextricably tied to natural resource use have been hit hard by regulatory- and market-driven losses and now by climate change impacts. Many rural communities never recovered from the recessions of the 1980s and the mid-2000s, nor

from the collapse of the timber industry in the 1990s. They continue to struggle with population loss, poverty and a lack of resources and services to meet basic human needs. Conservation is a “full stomach” issue; reweaving the fabric of rural communities, through sustainable economic development, is necessary to make inroads into environmental issues. There is a need to develop the “restoration economy.” This includes clean energy projects, “working landscapes” of sustainably-used forest and agricultural lands, outdoor recreation and other eco-tourism opportunities and conservation projects that restore ecosystem health and function.

- **Water** is a major issue – quantity, quality and allocation – across the entire state, although it has different community-level implications. Southern and eastern Oregon struggle with drought. Low snowpack in the Cascades has resulted in lower in-stream flows and warmer river temperatures even in the mid-Willamette Valley. Coastal communities largely drink surface water, the safety of which can be compromised by pesticide spraying and agricultural waste runoff. In September 2015, Oregon gained the dubious distinction of being the driest state in the country, surpassing California and Washington in drought impact. If current climate trends continue, as is likely, the very availability of water will become a fraught issue, not only in traditionally dry areas, but throughout the state. The costs of obtaining safe drinking water will rise steeply in many places. The Gordian knot may be the Byzantine system of water law in the West.

When stakeholders were asked about the **best role for philanthropy and for Meyer in particular**, in fostering a healthy environment, the following themes emerged most often:

- Think multi-dimensionally and beyond silos: Invest in projects that have socio-economic, as well as, ecological benefits.
- Support policy and systems change
- Support civic engagement, advocacy (particularly in Salem) and community organizing.
- Foster cultural competency and a more inclusive, diverse environmental movement – through funding, training and technical assistance and support for community-based and culturally-specific organizations to engage in environmental work
- Target investments to under-served and under-resourced rural and urban communities and engage them in decision-making
- Address disparities for communities that experience environmental burden – in particular, help historically-excluded communities to build their leadership and capacity and to have a voice or gain a seat at the table
- Build local and regional capacity and leadership – personal, institutional and collective – to support the success of community-driven projects and help collaborating organizations to cover the cost of their own participation in a collaborative effort
- Make investments that address climate change through practical, on-the-ground projects: land conservation, habitat restoration, water conservation, local food systems, urban agriculture, transportation, clean energy and energy efficiency
- Make investments that shift the “meta-narrative” about environmental and conservation issues, including education and strategic communications
- Invest in proven processes and products, with clear measurements of success and also in outcome-based approaches and innovative models with a longer-term focus

- Leverage other funders, including helping funders and agencies to align their resources to have great impact
- Serve as convener – of the nonprofit field, peer funders and local government – and thought leader
- Recognize that the environmental issues facing communities today are more apt to require decades than years to address and adopt granting strategies that recognize the need for sustained effort

Specific stakeholder recommendations

During the stakeholder engagement process, stakeholders were asked what should be prioritized by Meyer in supporting a healthy environment across the state. They were also asked how Meyer could best deploy its resources and use its strength to move the needle on key issues. All of the ideas offered below should be viewed in the context of equity: stakeholders encouraged Meyer Trust to focus investment to bring greatest benefit to those communities that are most under-resourced, most at-risk and bearing the greatest environmental burdens.

Suggested investment priorities

Five high-level priorities for a healthy environment emerged. Framing these is an overarching sense of the need for a triple bottom line approach and to support communities' ability to cope with an unprecedented level of social and environmental change. The top priorities were:

- **Build influence for the environmental movement.** This includes strategic communications, policy and advocacy, community organizing and “next generation” leadership development. It also includes a focus on creating a more diverse environmental movement, including partnering with tribes on public policy and other matters.
- **Build conservation capacity at the local and regional levels,** not only for traditional environmental groups, but for tribal and local governments.
- **Conserve Oregon’s critical landscapes and precious water resources.** Land conservation is a key contributor to water quality and ecosystem resilience and protects Oregon’s natural and cultural heritage. In particular, with every county in the state hammered by drought, water – including quantity, quality and allocation – is increasingly important from a conservation perspective.”
- **Create a healthy built environment.** This includes investments in efforts that contribute to urban livability and sustainability, with issues ranging from increasing housing affordability, food access, energy, transportation alternatives and walkability to reducing waste, toxics and poverty. This may bring a focus on the urban form and development pressures in emergent cities and help connect/bridge urban and rural communities.
- **Foster economic resiliency.** Particularly in rural communities whose economic health hinges on use of natural resources, invest in projects, programs and organizations that include local food systems, working forests and land restoration projects. Support developing employment opportunities in the “green economy.”

Funding approaches

Stakeholders encouraged Meyer to develop a framework for the portfolio that defines clear priorities but leaves room for flexibility and innovation and that is “multi-impact” in scope.

- **Multi-level, multi-impact funding.** Make investments that take a triple bottom line look – using social, economic and environmental lenses – at the intended impacts and possibly (as a result) draw from multiple pots of funding at Meyer). Foster collaboration across environmental, social and economic issue areas.
- **Longer-term investments.** Commit multi-year funding.
- **Flexible funding.** Avoid being overly prescriptive. Respond to local priorities, within “sideboards” that define the levers that Meyer believes are needed to make progress on core environmental concerns.
- **Leverage other funders.** This could include encouraging other funders to co-invest and even “bundling” funds from multiple funders.
- **Capacity building.** Develop individual, organizational and collective capacity. Make available small pots of funding for technical assistance and potential project exploration.

Beyond grant-making

As in the other portfolio areas, stakeholders see opportunity beyond direct funding for Meyer Trust to build community capacity to foster a healthy environment:

- Convene the field for dialogue and collaborative opportunities. In particular, bring together environmental groups and groups representing diverse communities to build relationships;
- Support collaboratives as a collective and also the individual participating groups;
- Use the “bully pulpit” as an opinion leader to catalyze action;
- Provide training, such as leadership development, cultural competency;
- Provide community-based “navigators” or “ombudsmen” to help organizations access funding and connect with one another for collective capacity-building; and
- Streamline/expedite the grant-making process, such as through a common application, particularly for smaller grants to grassroots organizations that have the least capacity to complete lengthy applications.