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CITY OF COLLABORATION

Civic, business and philanthropic leaders see advantage in working together

By Mary Moore

Boston once may have been considered a city of non-collaborators, portrayed such in a report released a half-dozen years ago, but civic, business and philanthropic leaders contend today that a spirit of working together marks community involvement.

A 2004 report commissioned by The Boston Foundation found that among Boston's challenges was an aversion among its institutions—public, private, educational, charitable—to working together toward common goals.

But even as the report was published, civic leaders said, Boston had begun shifting its approach. The recession likely accelerated matters, forcing leaders to wrangle with limited resources and to find more efficient ways of making a difference on social issues.

Increasing number of partnerships among civic and nonprofit institutions and interesting social entrepreneurship ventures have come to the fore. So, too, has volunteerism—the realization that writing a check is not enough and that, in fact, employees seek companies that care about their communities.

The Boston Foundation counts nearly 20 collaborations that have formed to achieve common civic initiatives. The Boston Opportunity Agenda is the most recent of these, which joins nine foundations and nonprofits, The Beal Cos., the city of Boston and the Boston Public School District to help improve the literacy, achievement and graduation rates of Boston Public School students.

A 'big collaborative effort' designed to make 'big change' in education, said Mary Jo Meisner, vice president at The Boston Foundation.

"You start to realize the value of currency," said John Fish, CEO of Suffolk Construction. "The mayor has political currency. Suffolk Construction has intellectual and financial currency. The college and university sector has intellectual and academic currency. The sports teams we've got... (they) have athletic currency. So why aren't we taking all of that currency and collaboration and leveraging it?"

Fish, of course, has been involved in many civic and philanthropic initiatives aimed at community improvement, including most recently the Boston Scholar Athlete Program, a collaboration between Suffolk's Red & Blue Foundation and the city of Boston, which aims to engage other businesses in Boston and bolster the city's faltering school sports programs.

"I think partnership have developed because people are recognizing that we've all got a responsibility to make a difference," said Alan Khazei, founder of Be The Change Inc. Khazei co-founded City Year, which centers on corporate partnerships. "People realize that government alone can't solve these problems."

That very notion inspired Robert Beal, president of The Beal Cos., when he was chairman of Combined Jewish Philanthropies. He realized that the major charities—Combined Jewish Philanthropies, Catholic Charities, United Way of Mass Bay and The Boston Foundation—had not come together to solve a social issue.

“I brought the charities together and that brought the focus on the Boston schools,” he said. From that, the Boston Opportunity Agenda was born. “This has never been done anywhere in the country.”

Increased collaboration also has meant companies partnering with nonprofits around volunteer opportunities—and volunteerism is on the rise. To that end, Boston Cares’ largest volunteerism program had a 16 percent increase in hours last year, said Patrice Keegan, executive director of the organization, which facilitates volunteer service opportunities.

“There’s been a lot of talk about volunteerism. The president talks about it all the time. The governor talks about it frequently. And the infrastructure to plug into volunteerism is improving,” said Keegan.

For those newer to the civic scene in Boston, the idea that the city has been anything less than collaborative comes as a surprise. Josh Kraft, for one, was executive director of the Boys & Girls Club in Chelsea before becoming president and CEO of the entire Boys & Girls Clubs of Boston organization in 2008.

“If its new (in Boston), its all I’ve known,” said Kraft, adding that the benefit of collaboration in a “no-brainer.” “We’re finding ways to put ego aside and work together. In the end, each individual organization or entity benefits. And the real endgame is that the city as a whole and community benefits. I figure we’re all in the same boat and want to see that happen.