

<http://philanthropy.com/premium/articles/v20/i18/18003301.htm>

Charity Goes Green

Nonprofit groups adopt environmentally friendly ways

[By Brennen Jensen](#)

The exterior of the Brooklyn Children's Museum's gleaming \$39-million, 55,000-square-foot addition, which opens in September, might be covered in bright yellow tiles, but the museum is also a "green" building — designed to use less energy and fewer natural resources, and built with sustainable, environmentally friendly materials.

Among the features: "wood" flooring that's actually made from sustainable bamboo, an energy-saving geo-thermal heating and cooling system that uses water from deep underground, waterless urinals, and solar panels that enable the facility to produce some of its own electricity.

"The museum has always been about teaching urban kids about the environment, so building green was a natural for us," says Todd Happer, the museum's director of communications.

Cutting Energy Costs

While constructing a new multimillion-dollar green building is perhaps the most public way for charities to proclaim their environmental awareness, more and more nonprofit groups of all stripes — not just those dedicated to protecting the environment — are "greening" their operations in ways big and small. Whether installing new energy-efficient light bulbs, boosting recycling efforts, or cutting down on employees' car usage now that gas prices are soaring by making it easier for people to bike to work, the nonprofit world is increasingly embracing various ways to go green.

Some groups have been motivated by a desire to cut high energy costs, while others have been guided by employees who have made environmental changes in their personal lives. Foundations and other donors have also started to press the groups they support to adopt green practices.

For example, the George Gund Foundation, in Cleveland, last year began requiring all of its grant seekers to provide a brief statement outlining what their organizations are doing to lessen the damage they do to the environment, especially in reducing global warming. The foundation Web site includes tips on how charities can take conservation steps and includes links to Web sites that provide additional information.

"Charities still have some time here and this isn't a crisis, but I do think in the future nonprofits are going to need to be more proactive in letting their donors know they are moving toward being green," says Ted Hart, president of Hart Philanthropic Services, a consulting group in Columbia, Md., and founder of the ePhilanthropy Foundation, in Washington, which helps nonprofit groups utilize the Internet. "Nonprofits will begin to feel the demand from foundations, corporations, and individuals who will be asking questions about their green policies. They are going to be held to new environmental standards."

In an online survey of more than 300 charities that Mr. Hart conducted in May, all but 3 percent of nonprofit officials said they believed charities could have a profound impact on the environment if they took more environment-friendly steps.

Slightly more than 12 percent of survey respondents rated their organization's current green status as "excellent," while 76 percent said it was an issue they were at least beginning to explore. More than a third of the charities surveyed said they set aside time during staff meetings to discuss their organization's environmental efforts.

"For some charities it's an issue of not having a path to follow," Mr. Hart says. "They don't know exactly how to go green."

Dana Lanza, executive director of the Environmental Grantmakers Association, in New York, says many charities embrace the misconceptions that going green is complicated and will cost a lot of money, both to plan and to put in place.

"Basically, it's pretty much common sense," she says. "Just think about how you can use less. Turning your computer off when you leave at night is a great starting point."

Ms. Lanza wrote the booklet, "Green Beyond Grants: Sustainable Practices for Foundations," with environmental advice nonprofit groups can use at their offices, when employees travel, and when they run events.

To further combat the notion that green must be costly, the Environmental Grantmakers started a Green Co-Op whose more than 50 members have access to discounts from vendors of green goods and services, including sustainable office supplies and hybrid rental cars. Membership is free and open to all grant makers (not just environmental organizations) and may be expanded in the future to allow charities to join as well.

Promoting Good Health

For many charities, it is both their mission and their money that drive discussions about how to reduce an organization's harm to the environment.

Margo Sidener, chief executive officer of Breathe California of the Bay Area, a charity in San Jose, Calif., that fights lung disease, says her charity's decision to become greener was a simple one to make, since a cleaner environment promotes lung health.

When the group bought its 3,000-square-foot office building in 2000, it updated the space by installing the latest energy-efficient heating and cooling system, adding a skylight to reduce the need for electric lighting, and planting trees on the grounds to provide shade. The charity spent about \$18,000 on the modifications but says it has more than recouped those costs in utility savings.

"It takes some upfront investment, but we probably spend 20 to 40 percent less on energy than most people in our size building," Ms. Sidener says.

At Foundation Communities, a charity in Austin, Tex., it all started with toilet flaps.

"That may sound ridiculous, but we own about 2,000 apartments and decided to spend a couple of hundred thousand dollars tightening up leaky faucets and leaky toilets," says Walter Moreau, executive director of Foundation Communities. "We made that money back in nine months, as energy costs and water costs are a huge part of our budget."

He adds: "There are practical reasons for nonprofits that own buildings to go green, even if you think global warming is hokey."

The charity has since started to place solar panels on some of its buildings and has begun to install long-lasting ceramic-tile flooring in some units, in lieu of carpeting, which regularly wears out and has to be

torn up and thrown away.

To further their greening efforts, last month Foundation Communities was awarded a \$50,000 grant from Bank of America to pay for a staff member the group informally refers to as a "green czar."

"It really takes one person who comes in every day and gives a real concerted effort to look at how we can reduce our energy and water usage," Mr. Moreau says. "That's not just going to happen with just some feel-good green projects; it's going to take a real focus."

He says the group is also working to educate donors about some of the environmental changes, adding that many of his supporters are unfamiliar with green terminology, such as "carbon footprint" (the size of an individual's or an organization's impact on the environment, measured in carbon dioxide, a byproduct of fossil-fuel usage thought to contribute to global warming).

"I have long list of individual donors that I can't imagine using that term with, but I think it's changing really quickly," Mr. Moreau says.

Getting Employees Involved

A few larger charities are choosing to hire designated staff members to design and put into practice efforts to reduce environmental damage. Other nonprofit groups organize committees or groups of employees to coordinate their environmental projects.

The Field Museum's "Greener Field committee" is a volunteer group of some 25 staff members from all the departments of the Chicago natural-science museum's 550-member work force. The group meets monthly to discuss the museum's greening efforts. Outside speakers are sometimes brought in to discuss the latest sustainable business practices. The committee was founded more than 10 years ago as a recycling committee, when it focused solely on increasing the museum's recycling efforts.

"We serve as a resource for the whole building and we're sort of a green watchdog group," says Carter O'Brien, an administrative coordinator and chair of the committee. "We've become a sounding board for the way we implement programs and changes that might involve staff behavior."

One of the areas where the museum has made strides is in making it easier for employees to bike to work. Seven years ago, when the charity was revamping its loading dock, it spent \$120,000 to put in a shower and bike-storage cages. Now more than 15 percent of employees routinely pedal to work on two wheels. This March the Greener Field committee helped set up a shared-bike program at the museum.

At the suggestion of an employee, the committee encouraged the museum to pay \$1,200 to buy two used bikes and repair a pair of surplus bicycles that security guards had once used to patrol the grounds. Now the bikes are available for staff members to use during the day to run errands or simply get some exercise.

"When people have great green ideas and don't know where the heck to go with them, we are the first place they turn," Mr. O'Brien says. "People are using the bikes every day, both for museum business and just to take a ride up and down the lake front. A healthier work force is also good for the museum."

Winning Attention

The George Gund Foundation says its environmental questions for grant seekers are largely designed to increase awareness of the issue, adding that it doesn't currently penalize groups that haven't adopted environmental practices.

The grant maker has, however, imposed a green-building policy that limits capital grants to those projects that

are seeking to construct buildings that receive at least a silver certification from the LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) rating system, run by the U.S. Green Building Council, a nonprofit group in Washington. (LEED certification is a means to quantify and rank a building's "greenness," from basic certification through silver, gold, and platinum levels.)

Grant seekers are required to submit a written commitment to that goal before the foundation will review their application for money.

"The threat of climate change is so significant, and we think it's important for every organization, no matter what they do, to look for ways to make a positive contribution to fighting this issue," says David Abbott, the foundation's chief executive. "Anybody building anything needs to take it into consideration, so if somebody wants our money, they have to commit to tackling it."

The Kresge Foundation, in Detroit, has given more than \$15-million in grants since 2001 to help charities develop green buildings. The foundation's own headquarters building was recently certified LEED Platinum.

"Green buildings are an important innovation to benefit the environment and also can be more cost effective over the long haul," says Lois DeBacker, Kresge's director of environmental programming. "We felt the foundation was in a position to support innovators in the nonprofit world that wanted to develop green buildings."

For the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, in Morristown, N.J., the approach is one of leading by example rather than by adding requirements for grant recipients.

The foundation has adopted several innovative green steps as part of its Living Our Values effort. In 2003 it sought to encourage workers to buy hybrid vehicles by offering them a monthly stipend of \$200 for the first two years of ownership. Today 12 of 19 employees drive the gas-saving vehicles.

The foundation has also worked to make its largest event greener, a twice-yearly poetry festival that draws as many as 20,000 people to suburban New Jersey. The food vendors are required to use recyclable containers and are encouraged to use locally grown food when possible. Festivalgoers are also encouraged to take mass transit to reach the event, or one of the shuttle buses the foundation runs from local hotels.

"We also offer ride-share opportunities," says David Grant, the foundation's president. "People going to the Dodge Poetry Festival can go to our Web site, hit ride share, and find out who else is going there."

As it turns out, transportation may be the next frontier in charity and foundation greening. Ms. Lanza, of the Environmental Grantmakers Association, says her next "Green Beyond Grants" publication will focus more on how people move around than where they work. "Ultimately, I think in five years you are going to see a trend away from traveling in foundations," Ms. Lanza says. "There will be more and more video conferences and cyber meetings, things like that."