



Commentary by Rip Rapson:

## **This Is a Whole New Ballgame**

*Kresge is building out a more comprehensive set of strategies that will enable us to help build the next era in Detroit.*

February 1, 2007

When I first arrived at The Kresge Foundation last July, I wrote to a group of my colleagues around the country about my initial impressions of a foundation with a long and distinguished tradition of capital-challenge grantmaking and about a city on an upward climb toward renewed vitality. I thought revisiting some of those impressions at the six-month mark might be a useful exercise for the President's Corner.

We're adjusting to life in our new offices, a spectacular constellation of "green" features intended not only to permit us to "walk the talk" of green design and construction – an increasingly high priority in our grantmaking – but also to provide an ongoing laboratory in which to measure the true costs and benefits of occupying a building intended to be as environmentally sustainable as possible.

The basic contours and values of Kresge's grantmaking tradition have remained remarkably constant over time. It has been challenging and energizing to revisit that tradition, exploring how we can carry forward those qualities of greatest value while relinquishing practices that serve less well in a world that is changing so rapidly and profoundly.

We're adjusting our front line of capital grantmaking to acknowledge the common-sense notion that a core set of values needs to inform our work – whether promoting low-income opportunity, influencing broader community development, promoting innovation within a field of work, encouraging collaboration or any number of other considerations. This is a seemingly self-apparent, straightforward proposition, but one with profound implications for a portfolio that has traditionally focused almost exclusively on an organization's fundraising capacity rather than on mission, strategies and impact.

We're examining how we might best contribute to the development of fields of high interest – the environment, education, arts and culture, health, community development, civic culture in Mexico and South Africa and nonprofit capitalization. The question is not only identifying the niches in which we can add value, but also expanding our philanthropic toolbox to include providing operating and program support, strengthening intermediary organizations, enhancing nonprofit networks, pursuing important research questions and promoting public policy reform.

We're eager to contribute to the energy and promise that is afoot in Detroit. I'm asked all the time whether it isn't difficult to move from such an extraordinary place like Minneapolis and St. Paul. Sure it is – the Twin Cities are even better from a distance. But the Detroit of 2007 is on the cusp of seismic changes: Redesigning its regional business plan in the wake of the downturns in the automotive industry. Revivifying neighborhoods still reeling from disinvestment tracing to the 1968 riots. Capitalizing on a glorious riverfront too long seen as the city's back door rather than its front porch. Reintroducing street life and cultural vitality to downtown and Midtown, defying deeply embedded stereotypes of these areas as dangerously uninviting.

Kresge has contributed significantly to bringing Detroit to this crossroads. Its investments were the catalyst for the revitalization of the riverfront. It has helped stabilize key human-services agencies. It has buttressed the community's cultural anchors.

But this is a whole new ballgame, as they say. Our trustees and staff are actively building out a more comprehensive, multifaceted, interdisciplinary set of strategies that will enable us to help build the next era in this city. With a wide swath of national and local foundations and Mayor Kilpatrick, we're zeroing in on key neighborhoods. We're taking the lead from a broad-based business coalition called Detroit Renaissance in identifying ambitious investments in entrepreneurialism and economic development. We're working with a diverse coalition of cultural organizations to develop a new set of supports for the region's cultural ecosystem.

As always, I welcome your thoughts and comments. I will use the next installment of this column to talk more specifically about the operational changes we have instituted at Kresge to help us pursue some of the ideas I've mentioned here. Stay tuned.