

April 2024

William Penn Foundation Stakeholder Engagement Executive Summary

Testing Emerging Approaches to Environment and
Public Space Grantmaking

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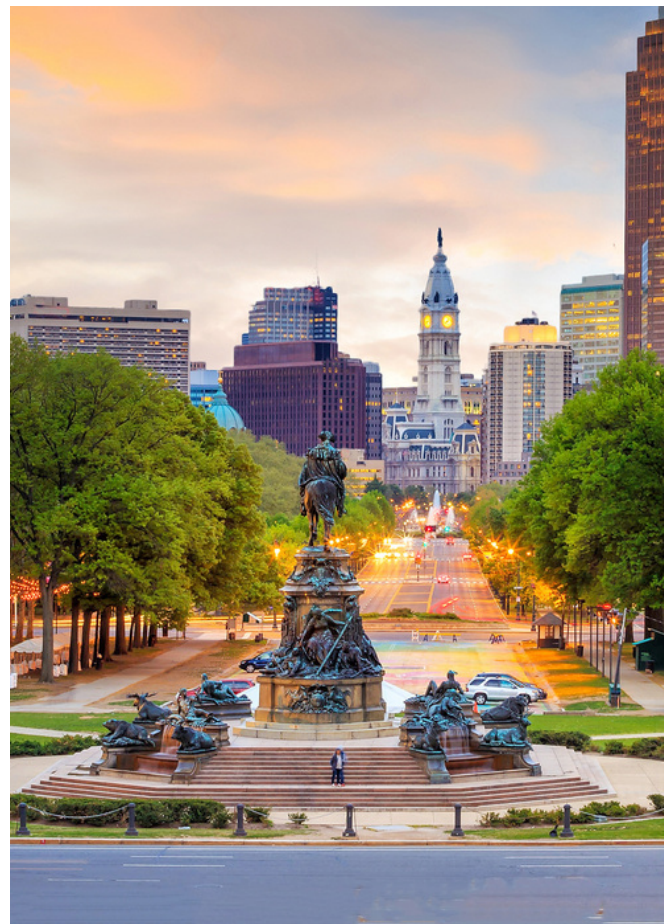
Overview

In 2023, as part of its strategic planning process, The William Penn Foundation conducted research and stakeholder interviews that resulted in a draft set of strategies that could guide grantmaking in the areas of environment and public space. The Foundation wanted to test these emerging strategies with a diverse set of stakeholders to ensure that they would address significant issues for communities across the Greater Philadelphia region. To accomplish this stakeholder engagement, WPF commissioned Courtney Bourns Consulting to gather feedback on its environment and public space grantmaking approach.

The goal of the stakeholder engagement process was to gather honest, confidential feedback on the overall direction of the program, with particular emphasis on the desirability and feasibility of the strategies and objectives in four strategy areas. WPF staff selected sixty (60) stakeholders to be interviewed. The consultants held thirty-six individual interviews, three small group discussions (eight people), and two virtual focus groups (sixteen people) representing a diverse set of stakeholders from nonprofit, community, government and academic settings. In addition, the consultants facilitated four in-person focus groups made up of parents and teens, hosted by educational and early childhood centers located in various neighborhoods in Philadelphia and Camden, NJ. These focus groups reached an additional forty (40) people.

This executive summary is drawn from a 50 page report that was submitted to WPF in early March 2024 and a shorter summary of in-person focus groups that was submitted to WPF at the end of March 2024. Select sections of the full report are included here: common themes heard across all of the strategies, feedback on the draft program goal, and advice to the Foundation.

The interviews and focus groups collected much more detailed, substantive feedback across four proposed strategy areas and seventeen objectives. The detailed feedback included areas of resonance and support for objectives as well as notable critiques and suggestions for improvement. Strong support was heard for the Foundation's consideration of a focus on climate resilience and environmental hazards as well as the proposed strategy's emphasis on community-level leadership to shape priorities. Stakeholders were also enthusiastic about ongoing investment in what were seen as legacy areas for the Foundation, namely natural/green and public spaces. The Foundation is actively considering all of the feedback as it refines its strategies for the next ten years.



Common Themes Across All Stakeholder Interviews

Aspirational language and leadership

Stakeholders expressed a desire for more aspirational language in the program goal and strategies, more clarity on the overall vision of impact, and language that spoke to the ultimate benefits of the objectives for people. In addition, stakeholders lifted up the unique platform held by the Foundation and the power of its leadership to help create a shared vision for the region across multiple sectors and interests.

Intersectionality of objectives

Most stakeholders who were part of this process saw the strategies and objectives as interconnected and overlapping and encouraged WPF to lift up those connections and consider grantmaking opportunities that would support multiple objectives. Stakeholders also saw intersectionality with important issues not mentioned in the objectives. For example, stakeholders mentioned a potential overlap with green jobs programming, and some saw an opportunity to invest in green energy as part of a resilience strategy. Safety and transportation were also frequently brought up as highly connected issues that will be important to realizing many of the objectives.

“Think in a big intersectional way. Climate policy can address some of the frontline issues like solarizing homes and making them more efficient. That also creates green jobs and stabilizes communities against gentrification. People are using less energy and their bills are lower.”

Community engagement and community-led planning

Stakeholders strongly resonated with the focus on community-led and community-driven planning in the objectives and identified this as critical to the success of the Foundation’s strategies as outlined. They hope the Foundation will provide the time and resources to do the community-driven planning well, and they suggested striking a balance between community voice and expert knowledge. In person focus groups emphasized the importance of including youth voices in the design of public spaces.

“I hope the Foundation will allow themselves the flexibility to follow where those planning efforts lead.”

Community agency: advocacy and organizing

Stakeholders consistently raised the need for advocacy as an important tactic for achieving a number of strategies, from creating dedicated funding for Parks and Recreation to advocating for compliance with pollution and other laws and standards. Stakeholders also mentioned the need for support of community organizer and attorney positions as foundational for sound advocacy and policy work.

Displacement/gentrification concerns

Concerns about gentrification (also called anti-displacement by some) were raised consistently in stakeholder interviews, particularly related to green space and improvements to parks and recreation spaces and open spaces. Stakeholders recommended that anti-displacement strategies be included actively from the beginning.

Cumulative burdens

A number of stakeholders encouraged the Foundation to think about addressing the harms caused by climate change and environmental hazards in terms of cumulative impacts or cumulative burdens as opposed to focusing on individual hazards or climate risks. They noted that burdens and hazards are disproportionately distributed, and vulnerable communities experience a greater share of the cumulative impact.

“When you think about vulnerable neighborhoods, they’re not just dealing with one issue. They have planes flying across them, they have heavy flood zones and excessive heat, they have microhabitat problems. So, their burden threshold is pretty high.”

Map and build on existing work.

Stakeholders recommend using existing plans or conducting original research to map a baseline or starting point for the objectives. Mapping will help WPF and grantees to better understand gaps and where to focus efforts and resources, as well as present a baseline from which to measure progress.

Nonprofit and collaborative capacity building

Stakeholders raised nonprofit capacity as a potential barrier to reaching the objectives outlined in the WPF strategies. Nonprofits need to be enabled to do more in regard to community engagement and planning processes, implementation, and advocacy. Stakeholders also spoke to the need for funding and technical support of collaboratives while keeping individual funding for collaborative members intact.

Maintenance

Stakeholders expressed resounding appreciation for the focus on maintenance of parks and trails — recommending holding off on new projects until barriers to maintenance of existing parks, recreation centers, and other public assets have been addressed and deferred maintenance is underway. In-person focus groups emphasized the importance of cleanliness and upkeep as well as good lighting.

Urgency

The urgency of the next decade with respect to climate change was brought up repeatedly by interviewees, with encouragement that the Foundation match the ambition of its strategies with the urgency of this critical time period. Urgency was also raised in regard to community gardens and green spaces that are being lost at an alarming rate to private development, as well as the lack of maintenance in parks and recreation centers that have led to closures and far more expensive remediation.

Stakeholder Feedback on Overall Program Goal

All stakeholders reviewed a **draft** program goal, which read:

Expand and strengthen access to the benefits of natural and community assets that improve the quality of life in communities burdened by low incomes and environmental hazards in Greater Philadelphia.

There was 100% resonance with the direction of the overall goal. “I’m encouraged by everything I see here.” “Yes, this resonates in huge ways.” “I’m glad to see the equity piece as the cross-cutting criteria.”

Several stakeholders noted that while the goal specifies a desired impact in terms of the access to the benefits of natural and community assets, it does not specify a desired impact in terms of addressing the harms caused by environmental hazards. “The focus seems to be on the access to benefits, and not addressing the burdens; would like to see more equal focus on the uneven distribution of environmental harms.”

The following input was offered on specific framing, phrases, and words in the goal:

Low income: Many stakeholders did not resonate with the words “low income” or the phrase “burdened by low incomes.” Including racial equity was more important to a majority of stakeholders than low income alone along with recognition that uneven environmental hazards in certain communities are the result of systemic causes such as racial and environmental injustice, redlining, and disinvestment. “Historically marginalized” or “improve the quality of life in communities that face multiple burdens” were offered as amendments.

Disadvantaged: This term worked for some stakeholders, while others felt it was important to use wording that recognizes that the burdens are not equally distributed. Quite a few people offered alternative suggestions and encouraged the Foundation to use language that focuses on the cause of the problem, not the people being affected. Suggestions included “overburdened,” “marginalized,” “vulnerable,” “historically disinvested in,” “historically resilient.”

Access: Define this term better and add “equitable” as a modifier.

Benefits: Define “benefits” more clearly and make them people-centric, such as access to healthy air and water, repair, and regeneration, for example.

Community assets: Several people spoke to existing community assets not being equal, and noted that in some areas, community assets do not exist at all. They thought the goal language spoke to improving access to the assets more so than improving the existing assets themselves. Some wanted to be sure that assets that they saw as high quality would be considered, even if the Foundation didn’t recognize them as high quality—they asked, “Who gets to define and prioritize the assets and speak to the level of quality?”

Community-driven/community-led: Stakeholders suggested that the overall program goal could better reflect the community-driven processes that are at the heart of many of the strategies. “Be more explicit about expanding access and voices of the community — put community voice right in the goal.”

Advice For William Penn Foundation

Stakeholders consistently expressed appreciation for being asked for their perspective and applauded WPF for its considered process in developing its new goals and strategies. Many of them also offered recommendations about the process, or “the how,” of carrying out the new strategies in environment and public space grantmaking. What follows is a sampling of the advice that was heard:

- Be transparent about the Foundation’s philosophy and approaches.
- There are good plans that have been created with community voice; focus on implementing them.
- Resource organizations for the long term.
- Incorporate knowledge and learning that both supports grantees’ efforts to learn lessons from their work and also builds a repository of knowledge and program-wide learning within WPF.
- Invest in partnerships.
- Strive to understand and address root causes through systemic analysis. Identify levers for change and fund activity around the places of greatest leverage.
- Don’t forget the areas outside of the city center — Allentown, Chester, Camden, Reading, Pottstown. Some of them have great needs.
- Identify the leaders on the ground achieving real things. It is not necessarily the usual nonprofits that have development staff who can write good proposals who are doing the best work.
- Pace the Foundation’s internal expectations — environmental work in urban areas is different from more rural areas.
- Ensure that metrics are right-sized so that internal pressure within the Foundation to meet goals and objectives does not trickle down to added pressure on the grantees.
- Require ADA compliance for funded grants.

Stakeholder Interview List

Chris Bartlett, William Way Center
Sari Bernstein, Public Interest Law Center
Radika Bhaskar, Thomas Jefferson University
Marc Cammarata, Philadelphia Water Department
Sarun Chan, Cambodian Association of Greater Philadelphia
Saleem Chapman, True Republic Strategies
Carlos Claussell, Sustainable Communities
Patty Elkins, Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission
Nicolas Esposito, Circular Philadelphia
Owen Franklin, Trust for Public Land
Ryan Gittler-Muniz, Public Interest Law Center
Tonetta Graham, Strawberry Mansion CDC
Jenny Greenberg, Neighborhood Gardens Trust
Ebony Griffin, Earth Justice
Rabbi Julie Greenberg, POWER Philadelphia
Richard Johnson, The Nature Conservancy
Andy Kricun, Moonshot Missions
Casey Kuklick, Philadelphia Horticultural Society
Liz Lankenau, Philadelphia Office of Sustainability
Genevieve LaMarr LeMee, City of Philadelphia, Office of Sustainability
Kat Leonetti, Philadelphia Office of Sustainability
Stasia Monteiro, HACE
Matt Rader, Philadelphia Horticultural Society
Maura McCarthy, Fairmount Park Commission

Virtual Focus Group Participant Organizations

Philly Gear Library
Phonk Philly
Four Youth
9th Street Community Center, Chester PA
Philadelphia Peace Park
Disability Pride PA
Chester Upland Youth Soccer
Homies Helping Homies
Superior Arts Institute
Gateway Community Action Program
Fairmount Park Conservancy, WeWalkPHL
VietLead
In Color Birding
Disability Pride
Philadelphia City Repair
Tiny Farm Wagon

Ash Richards, Parks and Recreation, Urban Agriculture
Kathryn Ott Lovell, Philadelphia Visitor Center
Angel Rodriguez, Philadelphia Land Bank
Christina Rosan, Temple University
Maitreyi Roy, Bartram's Garden
Nick Pagon, Riverways Collaborative
Gabriella Paez, Environmental Justice Commission Member, City of Philadelphia
Jerome Shabazz, Overbrook Environmental Education Center
Amy Sinden, Temple University School of Law
Julie Slavet, TTF Watershed Partnership
Dr. Eugenia South, University of Pennsylvania
Mathy Stanislaus, The Environmental Collaboratory, Drexel University
Alexis Shulman, Academy of Natural Sciences
Patrick Starr, Pennsylvania Environmental Council
Kira Strong, Rebuild
Sarah Clark Stuart, City of Philadelphia
Andy Toy, Philadelphia Association of Community Development Corporations
Julie Ulrich, The Nature Conservancy
Noelle Warford, Urban Tree Connection
Abigail Weinberg, Open Space Institute

In-person Focus Group Sites

Kinder Academy 7332 Elgin Street, Philadelphia
Urban Promise Ministries 27 N. 36th Street, Camden, NJ
Wonderspring Early Education 5901 Market Street, Philadelphia
Children's Playhouse Early Learning Center 2501 South Marshall Street, Philadelphia

This executive summary was written by Courtney Bourns and Deborah Linnell, who also conducted the stakeholder interviews.