



THE NONPROFIT
ASSOCIATION OF
OREGON

Good works. Together.

Town Hall Report Summary

We kicked off a five-part Nonprofit Town Hall series in Eugene on December 13, 2010. Between January and June 2011, we held additional sessions in Portland, Bend, Medford, and Pendleton, with close to 400 nonprofit practitioners participating in the conversations.

12-13-10	Eugene	78 participants
1-12-11	Portland	191 participants
4-17-11	Bend	50 participants
5-18-11	Medford	44 participants
6-7-11	Pendleton	27 participants

Our Goals

The Town Halls were designed as information-sharing and listening sessions. Specific goals for the series were to:

- Develop a map of the top challenges facing Oregon nonprofits
- Seek input from nonprofit leaders about the direction of NAO programs and services
- Identify priorities for public policy work
- Recognize capacity building work that is occurring in different communities, and identify gaps
- Determine assets and potential partnerships

“The strong attendance reflects a vibrant and engaged nonprofit community looking for better ways to serve. The themes were cooperation, collaboration, and communication and all three are key to survival in this new economy.”

— Priscilla Gould, Executive Director, United Way of Lane County

What We Learned

The recessionary economy dealt tough blows to the nonprofit sector and many participants shared similar challenges, such as: reductions in funding streams, declining government support, changing government policies and requirements, “doing more with less,” and the impact of the recession on employee’s families and morale.

In spite of these challenges, nonprofits are adjusting by recalibrating their resources, and often redefining their service models. There is no illusion that these are temporary changes. According to one participant, “flat is the new up.”

With these changes come new challenges, such as increased scrutiny of the sector and increased public accountability. With these changes also come opportunities, and we heard many examples of new collaborations.

Finally, recession or not, Oregon's size and increasing diversity pose both challenges and opportunities for nonprofits, with participants calling special attention to the need for employees and board members who reflect the communities they serve. And, they want tools and resources to build more effective boards and stronger leaders.

What Nonprofit Leaders Are Proud Of

Participants at the Eugene Town Hall told us that their community holds nonprofits in high esteem and that there is shared ownership of their success. Nonprofit leaders in Eugene and Medford mentioned formal and informal networks of nonprofit professionals that provide needed support and peer-learning. In Portland, increased support from the business community is helping the arts.

Across communities, participants shared stories of collaboration—among multiple nonprofits, with government agencies, and with the corporate sector. Many organizational leaders spoke of increasing or strengthening their impact and effectiveness with their constituents. Some participants reported success with more creative fundraising strategies, including greater use of social media.

Finally, there are visible symbols of pride such as new facilities, new initiatives, and even a few new nonprofit organizations.

“We need a voice for the sector. The business community has a voice through Chambers of Commerce. Government has a voice. But the nonprofit sector needs a unified voice and needs to be recognized as an equal and viable partner along with the business and public sectors.”

— Dennis Morrow, Executive Director, Janus Youth Programs

Advocacy & Public Policy Priorities

The nonprofit leaders in attendance at each town hall session were very engaged in the discussions about public policy and advocacy work. There was general agreement that our collective cause is the nonprofit sector itself, and if we raise the profile of the sector it gains credibility and strength. To do this, participants urged nonprofit organizations and their leaders to band together to promote the sector and educate the public and elected leaders about the vital role nonprofits play in every community. Many participants recommended partnering with the (for-profit) business community and other organizations and constituents to increase that base of support.

Several participants were especially eloquent when talking about how nonprofits should “embrace their role as advocates” for broad, as well as subsector causes. They also emphasized that most nonprofit leaders will require training and support in order to become engaged and to understand rules regarding participation in legislative and electoral activities. They would like to see NAO take a lead in this area.

In terms of policy initiatives that broadly impact the sector, the issue of government erosion of tax exemptions was the most commonly cited concern beyond raising general awareness of the role of nonprofits in community life. A participant at the Portland town hall session urged NAO to seek out voices that are not yet heard and engage new organizations in order to truly come together as a powerful, representative nonprofit sector.

Next Steps

We will continue the conversation! We will be hosting town hall sessions in 2012 in Coos Bay, Albany, Prineville, and Baker City.