GETTING TO GREEN

Learning from the Greenest City Community Grants Program
Introduction: Framing the Ambition

Vancouver aims to be the greenest city in the world by 2020. Achieving this ambition will take the involvement, and the commitment of the entire community. It will require residents and businesses, public and private sector, for-profit and non-profits to work together, forming an engaged constituency around “the greenest city” goals and targets. A full description of the City of Vancouver’s Greenest City Action Plan is at http://vancouver.ca/green-vancouver/greenest-city-action-plan.aspx

To support this endeavour, in 2012 the City of Vancouver and Vancouver Foundation embarked on the four-year Greenest City Fund Partnership. Each partner contributed $1 million to help fund community-led projects that further Greenest City Action Plan goals, such as green transportation, zero waste and local food.

Over four years, this ambitious and innovative program funded a wide range of projects and engaged over 35,000 people – possibly the biggest public engagement by the City of Vancouver to date, and unprecedented in North America in its scale.

The project has strengthened the Vancouver brand, helping to raise the city’s profile internationally and moving it ahead in an informal West Coast rivalry with Seattle and Portland for the title of “greenest city”. One stakeholder credits it with helping to attract the increasing number of networking and knowledge transfer events and conferences that come Vancouver’s way; others credit it with crystallizing a constituency around a platform of social policy changes that will be emulated by other major cities. The long-term outcomes of the collaboration are still emerging.

About this report

This report presents the insights and learning of The Greenest City Fund Partnership participants, across the four years between 2012 and 2015. This report focuses mainly on the experience of participants in the Greenest City Community Grants stream, because it was a novel program and unique to the City-Foundation collaboration.

This report will be of benefit to:

- **Vancouver Foundation and City of Vancouver**, as they review program impacts and consider future investment and partnerships
- **Municipal governments and foundations** exploring ways to create, strengthen or sustain partnerships that support urban sustainability efforts
- **Communities** trying to develop innovative projects, engage new audiences, and inspire and influence an ambitious urban sustainability agenda.

The information in this report was gathered from interviews with staff, advisors, grantees, and community partners, and by reviewing reports and documents provided by the City of Vancouver and Vancouver Foundation.
About the program
The Greenest City Fund added money and extended the mandate of two existing grant programs delivered by Vancouver Foundation. These were: Greenest City Neighbourhood Small Grants to fund projects created by Vancouver residents to improve their neighbourhoods (grants up to $1,000), Generation Green Grants to fund youth-led projects (grants up to $10,000).

The majority of the Greenest City Fund, and the largest grants, were distributed through a new program born of this collaboration: Greenest City Community Grants of up to $50,000 funded projects led by community-based charitable organizations.

The Advisory Board
An independent advisory board, appointed by Vancouver Foundation and City of Vancouver senior staff, reviewed applications and made funding decisions on Greenest City Community Grants. The advisory board members had strong connections to Vancouver neighbourhoods and communities, and deep expertise in different policy and outcome areas related to the Greenest City goals. Foundation staff qualified and brought applications to this Committee, who were then charged with review and final funding recommendations.

Goals and Criteria
The Greenest City Grants Program took a complex and multidisciplinary approach to what is meant by “green” and “sustainable”, explicitly encouraging novel, creative, innovative and collaborative approaches to projects.

In addition to demonstrating a realistic project plan and budget, grant applicants were called on to demonstrate:

- **Impact**: Potential to measurably advance one or more of the Greenest City Action Plan goals.
- **Community Engagement**: Project involves those affected by the proposed work and increases the skills and assets of Vancouver residents.
- **Community Benefit**: Is the project inclusive and does it have the capacity to benefit all city of Vancouver residents?
- **Community partnerships**: Does the project show evidence of collaboration with others in the same field?
- **Learning & Knowledge Transfer**: Is there a plan and willingness to share findings and lessons with community organizations and members?
- **Innovation**: Does the plan look at a problem or issue in a new way? Does it adapt an initiative from another city to potentially work in Vancouver?

“We subsidize the hell out of oil and infrastructure because we think they’re important. Air, water and soil are no different. It takes resources—time, money and expertise.”
— Marc Schutzbank, Fresh Roots Farm Society
Greenest City Fund in numbers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Grants Made</th>
<th>Funds Granted</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>2015</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td>2012</td>
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Total Greenest City Community Grants: $1,601,241

Number of Community Grants made: 63

Total granted, including Greenest Neighbourhood and Generation Green Grants: $2,000,000+

Total granted, including additional contributions from co-funders and individual donors: $4,000,000+
“Anything where institutions work collaboratively is good, and helps expand the effectiveness of what happens.”
— Andy Broderick, Vancity Credit Union
Designing the collaborations between stakeholders

The success of Greenest City Fund Partnership hinged on the quality and strength of the collaborations between the key stakeholders. In addition to the primary partnership between the Vancouver Foundation and City of Vancouver, it was essential to design effective relationships with co-funders, grantees and other stakeholders.

Good collaborations require a shared sense of purpose and direction, clear expectations and a focus on results. Knowing what the partners wanted to achieve—and setting a clear policy agenda and specific goals to attain it—was key.

Servant leadership

Getting this right at the beginning of the partnership helped to create a shared culture among City and Foundation staff of “being in service” to the goals of the grantees. While this “service leadership” was not part of the project design per se, it had a positive influence on relationships between stakeholders, reducing conflicts and facilitating action. As one stakeholder put it, “service leadership makes it a project of the city, not just by The City.”

Many grantee projects did not require city participation or approval. There were still sometimes delays in obtaining permits or accessing information for some of the innovative projects that “pushed the envelope” of City bylaws (like gardening in traffic circles). The shared culture around service leadership hastened resolutions, and turned the issues that did arise into “teachable moments” for grantees and City staff alike.

Key learning:

Make clear, written multi-year commitments to withstand changing people and priorities
Benefits of a collaborative approach

All stakeholders identified a number of benefits to the collaborative approach taken by the City and Foundation. Fundamentally, becoming the greenest city in the world is an enormously ambitious target, one that requires substantial amounts of time, money and expertise to achieve. Working in partnership means the demand for these resources falls across a broader set of shoulders, and provides the city with a bigger network to mobilize. The City recognized that it couldn’t meet its ambitious targets alone. Community members needed to have opportunities to connect and contribute their ideas and energy.

Greenest City Community Grants were successful because they helped get a broad and diverse base of engaged volunteers involved. By connecting their vision to a number of tangible, action-oriented, citizen-led projects, the City expanded their “social license” to continue advancing sustainability policy objectives.

It was clear that working in partnership facilitated engagement between community organizations and the City. As one stakeholder observed, “most community organizations want to work with the City; the program brought down some of the barriers.”

Working in partnership also had the benefit of creating opportunities for community groups to consider projects that would advocate for approaches that might have been difficult for the City to consider directly—like choices in lifestyle and consumption habits around food, transportation, etc. that are deemed ‘personal’.

Co-funder relationships

Several other funders—notably Vancity Credit Union, and the Real Estate Foundation of BC—contributed well over half of the funding to projects by Greenest City Fund grantees. The Greenest City Fund initially committed to support up to 75% of project budgets, anticipating relatively modest support from co-funders—but this was not the case, and individual and institutional co-funders gave more, overall, to the grantee projects than the Greenest City Fund did. Individual Vancouver Foundation donors also contributed generously to a number of projects.

The importance of designing effective collaborations between co-funders cannot be overstated. Co-funder engagements need to happen very early on to ensure buy-in and maximize the funder’s potential contribution. Freeing up grant money, finding capacity to engage people in the work, and leveraging other grant funds all take time, and funders may have an interest in committing resources to specific areas.

Early collaboration also reaps the full benefit of the funders’ networks and expertise. There is no substitute for the on-the-ground knowledge that funders have about the communities and sectors they fund. Early collaboration also helps avoid inefficiencies: when lead funders formally engage co-funders around “what’s next”, rather than bringing them in only when additional resources are needed, it can help harmonize communications, and reduce duplication and overlap in application processes. Regular meetings for co-funders to hear progress updates, be exposed to potential grantees, streamline the process and share lessons learned, would result in a more invested, and collectively wiser, funding group.

Identify champions to own the partnership within stakeholder organizations
Flexibility in Funding

In allocating resources to the Greenest City Fund, Vancouver Foundation and the City needed to identify unrestricted sources of funds so that they could have flexibility in the types of projects that could be considered for grants. While applicants are presenting increasingly complex, multidisciplinary work, many funding pools continue to be narrowly prescribed for causes like “environment” or “arts”, which may restrict the supply of money for innovative approaches.

Funders who have participated in funding collaboratives will recognize the complexity of working around overlapping or conflicting terms of reference for donor-advised, field-targeted, or regionally-targeted funds. Unrestricted funds are always in high demand, and community foundations and other partners considering something like the Greenest City Fund should bear in mind this resource requirement.

Providing a range of grant sizes (larger community grants, medium-sized youth grants, and smaller neighbourhood grants) and providing multi-year funding commitments enabled the Greenest City Fund to support a wide variety of projects and approaches. It allowed a broader range of grantees, beyond “the usual suspects” of existing non-profit programs, to present innovative, multidisciplinary approaches to “green” goals.

And finally…

A final unexpected benefit of the Greenest City Fund Partnership could be described as “the feel-good factor”. This didn’t derive from the amount of money invested, but from a sense that the Fund was providing genuine, on-the-ground support at a community level. Collaboration partners paid attention to participants’ experience of the projects and related changes in ideas, opinions and behaviours. As one stakeholder put it, “I didn’t fully understand that connecting people to nature would foster such hope and self-worth. We noticed it right away, and I couldn’t have predicted that.”

Lessons learned

- Work to create a culture of “service leadership” to the goals of grantees
- Invest time up front to build strong stakeholder relationships
- Engage co-funders early on
- Identify champions to own the partnership within stakeholder organizations
- Make clear, written multi-year commitments to withstand changing people and priorities
- Unrestricted funding is needed to fund complex, multidisciplinary work
“The Partnership has been essential in resourcing the "community dreams" that inspired and shaped the Greenest City Action Plan, especially in the food movement.”

— Kevin Millsip, Advisory Board Member
Implementation: soliciting applications and making grants

The experience of delivering the Greenest City Community Grants over a four-year period clearly demonstrated that there is a significant unmet demand for such projects. With a little encouragement and funding, people proved genuinely eager to participate.

The grant application process

Participants felt strongly that Vancouver Foundation provided an excellent platform for administering the grant application process. Many either cited the quality of support they received with grant applications and project execution as a critical success factor, or expressed regret for not drawing upon it more. The two-stage application process required an initial letter of intent in advance of a full grant application. This gave staff an opportunity to advise potential grantees on how well their project goals aligned with funding objectives, and saved applicants from “pouring their heart and soul” into detailed applications that were not aligned.

The Advisory Committee independently reviewed and selected projects to be funded. While City influence was still evident, stakeholders tended to perceive it as more supportive than controlling. This “hands-off” approach was broadly positive, because removing the decision-making from city council avoided politicizing the grant approval process. Advisory Committee member participation in discussion and decision-making was subject to Vancouver Foundation conflict of interest and confidentiality policies and procedures.

Mixing “green” and social objectives

Vancouver Foundation and the City of Vancouver were aligned and consistent in presenting the criteria for projects as “green first, social second”—all applicants were required to provide a convincing case for how their project would influence the City’s performance on a number of specific, well-defined environmental indicators.

Applying this principle in practice was not easy; applicants were specifically called on to submit innovative and interdisciplinary projects and considering their “green” and social aspects separately proved to be complicated. Some Advisory Committee members recalled lengthy debates over the definitions, vision, and intent of the Greenest City Fund goals. Allowing more time in the early development of the program for the Advisory Committee to develop a shared understanding of values, principles and goals could have resulted in shorter meetings.

Nonetheless, more than one stakeholder commented positively that the way the program was presented meant that sustainability was accepted as a direct and practical approach to facilitating shifts in behavior—a productive alignment of social and sustainability objectives.

Two-stage grant application process was both efficient and effective
Achieving representative diversity

While some excellent projects were funded, overall, organizations serving indigenous, Chinese, South Asian communities were underrepresented relative to the proportion of Vancouver’s population they comprise.

In order to make the case for the creation of the Fund, both City and Foundation agreed that the majority of the Fund would be allocated to grants rather than administration. While the intent is laudable, in practice it meant four full years of program costs – for staff, space, communications, technology, etc – were uncompensated and absorbed into existing Foundation staff and resources.

One stakeholder commented that programs were more inclusive and accessible where there was support from “unfunded champions” – volunteers who took time to ensure participation of marginalized people and groups.

More requests came from organizations whose core mandate had an environmental focus, rather than from community organizations whose missions prioritized social or cultural goals. Freeing up more time to build City and Foundation relationships with community organizations less likely to see themselves as “green” may have helped increase the audience reach and engagement of the program.

Investing in long-term behaviour change

Practical, hands-on projects that would engage many people directly were seen as a priority. In large part, this is because such projects are known to be more effective at fostering behavior change than information or advocacy campaigns. Information campaigns don’t change behavior nearly as much as people working, practicing, and “doing stuff” together with other people. As one stakeholder put it, “from a social point of view, whatever you’re trying to achieve, a deeper and broader approach to engagement is going to be more successful.”

The Community Grants helped move projects from the preparation stage to stages of action, and maintenance—but there may need to be greater recognition that relapse is part of the project cycle, and longer support around “action” and “maintenance” is required to make behaviour changes last.

This corresponds with another stakeholder’s view that simply putting the infrastructure in place is not enough (e.g. with bicycle lanes). Programming, outreach and events are needed to engage the public, and have the potential to double or triple the impact of an investment in infrastructure.

The projects funded by the Partnership helped foster community and connection at a neighbourhood level by touching people’s immediate, day-to-day lives. Tangible outcomes are what inspire people to action. Most people aren’t entrepreneurs – they need to see real examples of what is being achieved to feel emboldened to join in. Social media played an important role in inspiring participation by sharing Vancouver’s progress towards its goals and inspiring people to ask, “what can I do to support this?”

One participant summed it up nicely: “[The Greenest City Fund] was less about growing thousands of pounds of food than the fact that you can do a tangible thing right outside your window. The more you can have both symbolic success and real green businesses and jobs, the more it helps other things to happen.”
Lessons learned

- A two-stage grant application process is both efficient and effective
- Allow time for advisory board to “norm” around shared values and goals
- Prioritize outreach work and lead cultivation – and plan accordingly
- Ensure that diversity and inclusion are clearly assigned responsibilities, not just ideals
- Invest in outreach and education to multiply the impact of infrastructure projects
- Tangible, relatable outcomes inspire people to action
“I didn’t fully understand that connecting people to nature would foster such hope and self-worth. We noticed it right away, and I couldn’t have predicted that.”
— Sarah Common, Hives for Humanity
Supporting projects and monitoring progress and outcomes

Once the program was underway, consistent leadership was needed to maintain focus on the ambition and to broaden support. Success rested on how well the grantees delivered their projects, how consistently project results were monitored, and how effectively results were communicated to stakeholders and the public.

Leadership from the middle

Both Vancouver Foundation and the City of Vancouver had specific (and differing) needs for leadership and direction. City engineering and planning staffed needed internal champions to help them understand the program as more than a metric-driven technical exercise. City Council needed to provide a coherent narrative connecting the program to other civic actions and the policy agenda, and Vancouver Foundation staff needed to engage community, board, donors and advisors.

Maintaining clarity of focus on the shared goals over the length of the partnership proved to be a challenge. There was a shared responsibility for public leadership and communication about the Fund, and it was a challenge for all parties to coordinate “telling the same story the same way”. Owning, guiding and evolving the program narrative in multiple channels required greater levels of leadership, coordination and effort than was forthcoming. While city councilors could provide the political steer, by design they were at arms’-length from grant-making and project work. Responsibility often fell to Vancouver Foundation staff to describe the relationship between “green” issues and broader social and policy concerns—a role also filled by the City’s Sustainability and Social Policy departments.
**Evaluating progress and reporting results**

The evaluation and reporting requirement for grantees was commensurate with the relatively modest size of the grants. Grantees reported on the project outputs, accounted for the use of funds, and reflected on what they learned, and what insights they had that could serve others.

There was a thirst and appreciation for opportunities where grantees could learn together. Several events were hosted that brought together grantees and other stakeholders into a forum for sharing stories and ideas, and encouraged grantees to learn and adapt from each others’ successes. Several grantees identified these events as a highlight of their experience—they helped grantees gain a broader view of what successful, good projects look like from the funder’s perspective. As one stakeholder said, “Other foundations are more cryptic about what they are trying to achieve. The clarity around broad goals, and seeing other applications, helped us to apply successfully.”

One of the reflections here is that stakeholders wanted more in-depth learning and dissemination of learning than happened over the course of the program—they wanted their work to have meaning for others, and be valued, and have the capacity to share it. Though the funding partners may share insights from grant reports with internal stakeholders (e.g. Vancouver Foundation board, city council, etc.), there was a desire from grantees that more of that shared feedback to go back to community. Although the City created a website to share grant stories and encouraged community organizations to make submissions, few did.

Community members sought an experience that was more complete—in terms of understanding the impact of their work—than getting a confirmation of the receipt of their grant report and some in-person follow-up from Foundation staff. Where data or feedback on results was given, it served as a powerful motivator, and provided valuable information that helped grantees refine the focus of their work and make it more dynamic.

Reporting is not yet complete for the final round of Greenest City Fund grants—a final summary of grant outcomes is still forthcoming.

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*Empirical data and tangible performance measures gain more immediate buy-in from skeptics*
Data convinces sceptics

There was some tension at the outset between an evaluation focus on scientific measurement of environmental targets, versus a focus on long term social and ecosystem impacts. As the program progressed through subsequent years, it shifted away from a defined set of indicators to more long-term outcomes.

Given the political dimension of several goal areas, programs that emphasized an empirical approach to measuring progress against environmental targets were less contentious with skeptics than those perceived to be about social targets.

Some stakeholders considered it a strength of the collaborative approach that the Partnership was confident enough to hold its course despite complaints and “squeaky wheels”. This approach often proved an effective one – for example, although the downtown Business Improvement Area (BIA) initially opposed the expansion of the bike lane network, they eventually reversed their position and came onside.
The cost of success

Some projects were reliant on the capacity of other organizations to deliver their objectives, leading to gaps in capacity. Hives for Humanity reported that their successful projects were part of a broad rise in popularity of bees and beekeeping in urban areas. They observed that other organizations, whose core expertise was not in pollinator gardens or bee husbandry, “jumped on the bandwagon”, and ended up with unhealthy hives. These infected hives could compromise healthy bee populations in the area, so Hives for Humanity, who specialized in this area, were called upon (and partly out of self-interest) to provide unpaid technical expertise. As part of their own success, Hives for Humanity saw a big (and unanticipated) lift in demand for their services without a corresponding lift in core funding to support more than their own grant projects.

More than one grantee commented on how the positive attention their projects received created pressure to be more active in the media. This required unanticipated additional capacity they didn’t have – which meant relying on unpaid overtime to take advantage of the opportunities that emerged.

Lessons learned

- Empirical data and tangible performance measures gain more immediate buy-in from skeptics
- Sustained commitment from senior leaders that can withstand changes in leadership is essential
- Monitoring and evaluation is resource-intensive, and setting expectations up front about how results will be shared is valuable
- Events for grantees to share progress and experience were highly valued
- Tease out hidden dependencies and consider potential funding implications
The grant process was flexible in dealing with contingencies as the relative need for different types of programs changed. HUB, whose mission is to get more people cycling, received a grant to support settlement agencies with the promotion of cycling for transportation for immigrant and refugee newcomers. When they proposed the work, it was in advance of the refugee crises. As the crisis unfolded, the Foundation was flexible in allowing HUB to adjust its program and staffing requirements to meet the needs of overstretched settlement personnel.

As a result of the grant’s flexibility, HUB was able to devote more staff time to engaging with settlement workers, and shift some of the grant’s focus to instructing more newcomers than originally anticipated. One of HUB’s staff members has a background in immigrant and refugee settlement work, which allowed HUB to make strong professional and community contacts for the project. This active and flexible collaboration with immigrant settlement service providers improved the project’s impact getting more newcomers knowledgeable about and skilled at city cycling.

Flexibility and responsiveness enabled better results
“In the way the program was presented, “sustainability” was not seen as esoteric—it was presented as a direct and practical approach to facilitating shifts in behaviour”

—Joji Kumagai, Strathcona Business Improvement Association
What lies ahead

As the granting partnership between Vancouver Foundation and City of Vancouver winds down, both sides are reflecting on what lies ahead. Taking a complex, multidisciplinary approach to green grants resulted in some innovative projects that brought measurable benefits to Vancouver and furthered its Greenest City ambitions.

While some stakeholders expressed disappointment that the Greenest City Fund grants will not continue at the same scale, the collaboration throughout the program has informed the development of the City’s Healthiest City strategy, which is just gaining momentum.

Learning from the Greenest City Partnership is also being embedded into other areas of both the City’s and Foundation’s work. Vancouver Foundation has deepened its commitment to supporting innovation capacity of a number of the Greenest City grantees, providing larger, longer-term funding through its regular granting channels. The Greenest Neighbourhood Small Grants partnership continues, providing residents with access to funding that supports neighbourhood-scale green projects. The City of Vancouver is renewing a funding commitment for programs through its offices of Social Policy and Sustainability.

The Greenest City Community Grants program stands as an example of how a major city can build an engaged constituency around a defined set of sustainability targets and policy objectives. The strong focus on tangible, sustainability-focused projects provided a direct and practical approach to facilitating behavior change, and has helped foster a productive alignment of social and sustainability objectives in all the organizations involved.

Life after grant

As some projects evolved over two or more years of funding, maintaining scale or growth required additional, not less, funding. Organizations are understandably wary of one-time funding for projects that may create longer-term expectations that can’t be met. Most projects that succeeded in scaling, influencing policy, or continuing beyond their initial grant, had either formed relationships with relevant City staff early on or had strong existing networks. Where projects were successful at creating lasting changes in city policy, it was due to the project’s own efforts. For example, the project lead for West Side mobile food markets developed her own advisory council composed of City staff, health authority members, and other influencers, so that the project results were well-connected to a mechanism for further scaling and implementation.

Some grantees were able to develop relationships with the City and use this to develop longer-term plans beyond the grant term, while others failed to do so. Projects that were not well-aligned to organizational mandates or well-connected to a broader policy objective, struggled to continue beyond the initially-funded program period. While the Green Block project was successful in their environmental footprint analysis, and produced sound recommendations for citizens and city planners, it also evolved organically into a kind of independent “citizen’s assembly” neighbourhood planning exercise—but unfortunately one that lacked City Planning counterparts that were prepared to engage with their ideas.

One successful grantee observed that while their project was strongly pushed to identify collaborators as part of their grant application, they also had an existing contract for technical and communications work with the City, which provided both policy and industry connections. The City has established channels for citizens to connect to Sustainability and Social Policy projects, and continues to provide grants to community organizations so that citizen initiatives can proceed beyond the pilot phase.
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Ecotrust Canada
Elements Society
Environmental Youth Alliance
Evergreen
Farm Folk/City Folk Society
Fresh Roots
Georgia Strait Alliance
Global Youth Education Network Society
Gordon Neighbourhood House
Habitat for Humanity Society of Greater Vancouver
HASTE BC
Hives for Humanity
Hua Foundation
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