

Promises of Aid to Rural Areas Ring Hollow

By Aaron Dorfman
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If Sen. Max Baucus treats his re-election campaign next year as casually as he is treating his campaign to double philanthropic giving to rural America, he could be vulnerable to a serious challenger.

The Council on Foundations last month held a conference on rural philanthropy in response to the challenge that Senator Baucus, a Montana Democrat, issued in 2006 to double in five years the amount of money foundations give to rural America.

Mr. Baucus chairs the Senate Finance Committee, which has legislative jurisdiction over foundations. The council, therefore, wants very much to stay in the good graces of the senior senator from Montana.

But Mr. Baucus should be disappointed with the results of his campaign's progress in the year after he issued the challenge. A report released several weeks ago by the Center for Rural Strategies concluded that, "there is little evidence of a substantial increase in philanthropic resources directed at rural communities."

More than 180 foundation and nonprofit officers attended the conference in Missoula, Mont., and most of them made their way there because they sincerely wanted to find ways to increase and improve grant making to rural cities and towns. The conference did a decent job of helping people already committed to rural grant making improve the quality of their work.

No one in the room, however, had the ability to deliver new resources to rural America; the senator and the council were preaching to the choir. Of the 50 wealthiest foundations in the country, only nine sent anyone to the conference and only three sent their president or chief

executive. Those 50 foundations control more than \$179-billion in assets. The nine largest foundations that were represented are already committed to supporting rural causes and aren't likely to significantly increase their grant making for rural causes.

Setting aside the issue of those large foundations for the moment, let's consider raw numbers. The United States has more than 100,000 foundations, and fewer than 100 were represented at the conference.

If you're trying to win an election campaign, you communicate with registered voters and especially with people who are likely to vote. If you're trying to double grant making to rural America, you need to win the support of the people who have the ability to deliver the money. You need to communicate with decision makers at a significant number of the nation's foundations.

The senator knows how to run and win an election campaign: In a state not known for favoring Democrats, he has held office continuously since 1973. Whenever Senator Baucus runs for election, he creates a detailed campaign plan that accounts for every contingency and meticulously lines up the votes needed for victory. He leaves nothing to chance when campaigning for public office.

If he is serious about his campaign to double the amount foundations give to rural causes, it's time for him to step up to the plate and develop a real plan for this effort, too.

Holding a conference that engages only the true believers won't get the job done. The base of committed rural grant makers needed for a real campaign on this issue is in place — they were in Missoula. But with only four years remaining on the senator's challenge, what is the strategy to win this campaign?

If the senator were running a real campaign, he would develop a list of 500 foundations that plausibly could increase their grant making to rural causes. Those are the swing voters that could make or break the campaign.

The senator would reach out to key decision makers in those foundations, one by one or in small groups, and attempt to convince them that investments in rural America are consistent with the interests of their foundation and with the best interests of the nation. He would tell them

that rural nonprofit groups have the capacity to successfully deal with the pressing problems plaguing many rural areas.

Moreover, the senator would create situations where relationships between rural nonprofit leaders and foundation decision makers could be built, and he would enlist other members of Congress who represent rural communities as allies in the campaign. The senator would ask for pledges and track actual grant making for rural communities as closely as he asks for votes and tracks polling numbers during an election campaign.

One strategy that has proven to be effective for increasing support for rural nonprofit groups involves politicians, foundations, and nonprofit organizations working together to show how effective rural grant making can be and to seek out new investors strategically.

For example, Colorado holds Rural Philanthropy Days, where private and government grant makers travel to remote parts of the state to learn about the communities, their nonprofit organizations, and their needs. Those special visits are a key reason that grant making to rural groups in Colorado has been quintupled over the past 15 years. This disciplined approach has changed attitudes and established new relationships, two key ingredients that lead to grant making.

If Senator Baucus were running a real campaign to double grant making to rural areas, he and other members of Congress would encourage other states to hold Rural Philanthropy Days. This kind of effort is both a "voter persuasion" and a "get-out-the-vote" strategy.

The Council on Foundations won't run this kind of campaign for the senator; it's not generally considered good form for a trade association to pressure its members. At its best, if Senator Baucus keeps the spotlight on this issue, the council will provide information and opportunities to help foundations interested in rural areas meet to discuss ways to expand their rural grant making. With that approach alone, grant making to rural communities might double in 20 years, but it certainly won't double in five.

It is entirely possible, of course, that what Senator Baucus really wants is simply to generate a few more crumbs for deserving Montana nonprofit organizations. If that's the real goal, then his campaign is working just fine. The site visits during last week's conference highlighted the good work of several organizations, and a few grants will probably trickle down as a result.

But I hope Senator Baucus was serious about his challenge to double rural grant making. The people who live in rural America and the nonprofit organizations that serve or represent them need and deserve a true champion for their cause.

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