



NEWS RELEASE

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Organizers Announce: Community Progress Initiative Continues, Receives Half-Million Dollar Grant from Ford Foundation

Wisconsin Rapids, WI, January 25, 2007 ... Community Progress Initiative organizers – Community Foundation of South Wood County and Heart of Wisconsin Business & Economic Alliance – announced today that the **Community Progress Initiative** will continue.

Initially started in April 2004 as “a bold three-year program in South Wood County and Rome to create vibrant communities with prosperous local economies,” the **Community Progress Initiative** encourages residents to ‘Make It Happen’ with programs targeted to:

- Create a business-friendly environment and empower entrepreneurs
- Shape a shared vision for people throughout the region
- Stimulate new enterprises resulting in additional job opportunities
- Build the area’s endowed charitable assets to support sustainable community development
- Motivate emerging young leaders to drive positive change
- Inspire community spirit and pride

“Since 2004, the Progress Initiative has provided a solid base of programs that support residents and business owners working together toward a shared vision of community and economic improvement. One key objective, which I think we’ve met, was to help the community culture be more self-reliant. Now is the time to build upon what’s been developed with adaptive programming to meet current and future needs. After all, being adaptive, creative, and innovative is what the Progress Initiative is all about. That’s what people will see, and should feel free to add, as we go forward,” said **Fred Siemers**, executive vice president of River Cities Bank and board member of both Community Foundation of South Wood County and Heart of Wisconsin Alliance.

In conjunction with the announcement that Progress Initiative programs and objectives will continue, organizers showed that financial support for the Initiative also is continuing. The Ford Foundation has awarded a \$500,000 two-year grant to support many areas of the Community Progress Initiative.

According to **Linetta Gilbert**, Senior Program Officer, Community and Resource Development, of the Ford Foundation, "Progress takes time, but early results from the Community Progress Initiative are very encouraging. The Ford Foundation is committed to supporting this forward movement. We see this grant as investing in people who are investing in their community. The Progress Initiative serves as a model that can be replicated in other communities undergoing economic adversity," she said.

The **Ford Foundation** grant will ensure that the following programs continue and/or expand:

Advanced Leadership Training:

1. To increase the capacity of recognized leaders to act on behalf of the community, advance collaboration among the citizenry at all levels, and initiate new partnerships to use community resources wisely and effectively.
2. To form an adaptive leadership/trusteeship group prepared to discuss and act on strategies and solutions for emerging challenges and issues within the community.
3. To establish a citizen-based, inclusive system to transfer leadership to others.

Innovative Industry Leadership:

1. To create a business-friendly culture that supports entrepreneurs and other business owners, increasing their ability to take advantage of opportunities to create and expand a diversified range of businesses that adds new jobs to the local economy.
2. To build the capacity and confidence of cluster leaders, the champions of industry change, to create a cultural shift favoring local collaboration over competition and also building awareness of industry interdependence.
3. To assist cluster leaders to think innovatively and take on strategies for new ways of doing business to benefit the entire community.
4. To develop the Industry Cluster Network strategy and structure for use as a model in other communities.

New Ideas! Speakers Series:

1. To motivate broad community engagement, inspire leadership, and create a positive attitude among residents and business owners, increasing confidence in the ability to shape the future of the Heart of Wisconsin area, to inspire risk-taking, and drive change.

Foundations for Community Leadership:

1. To broaden the base of leadership and encourage civic engagement at all levels within individual communities by enhancing the leadership skills of residents.
2. To increase each community's knowledge of its vision, its ability to carry out that shared vision, and to reinforce a sense of ownership.
3. To improve collaborations, resulting in a stronger community.
4. To support Progress Teams to be inclusive, flexible, and respected leadership entities within their communities.
5. To develop a structure for grassroots leadership to support and collaborate with elected officials to turn their community visions into reality.

Communication/Storytelling:

1. To make more citizens aware of the Community Progress Initiative through telling the stories of people making a difference.

Evaluation and Planning:

1. To conduct an outside evaluation of the Community Progress Initiative.
2. To identify potential gaps and opportunities.
3. To articulate the ability to replicate these efforts in other communities.

“Participants in the Initiative have been using the slogan, ‘*Make It Happen*,’ since the Initiative was launched in 2004. Now ‘*It’s Happening*’ and it’s more important than ever that local residents be supported in their efforts to create a vibrant economy and community. We’re just beginning to see new leaders emerge. We can’t stop now; we need to continue the effective networks and programs that are happening,” said **Helen Jungwirth**, Daily Tribune publisher, Advanced Leadership Institute participant, and Community Foundation board member.

Since the Progress Initiative began almost three years ago, hundreds of local residents have become engaged in the community in new ways. These include:

- **Eight industry cluster networks:** Arts & Heritage; Cranberry/Agriculture; Downtown Revitalization; New eEconomies; Paper & Forestry Products; Small Business Development; Tourism; and Workforce Training & Education
- **Seven Progress Teams** of local residents working toward making their community vision a reality: Nekoosa Area; Pittsville Area; Port Edwards; Rome; Rudolph; Vesper Area; and Wisconsin Rapids/Biron/Grand Rapids
- **Six Progress Funds** to support unique community improvement projects as identified by local residents: Nekoosa Area; Port Edwards; Rome; Rudolph; Vesper Area; and Wisconsin Rapids Area
- **Ongoing study tours** for residents and business owners to explore best-practice case studies along with successful business and community development activities
- **Entrepreneurial Assistance Programs:** Entrepreneurial Boot Camp; Central Wisconsin Business Angels Network; Entrepreneur revolving loan fund; Entrepreneur business-to-business club; Online Ideas Incubator; Entrepreneurial technical support; Business innovation workshops; Economic growth survey by NorthStar Economics
- **Leadership Training Programs** to support current residents and organizations in leadership roles and to create new leaders for our area’s future: Teen Leadership; Advanced Leadership Institute, Building Better Boards; Community Leadership Program; It’s Your Turn Leadership Explorations

In a statement released by **Kelly Lucas**, president of the Community Foundation, and **Connie Loden**, executive director of Heart of Wisconsin Alliance, they said, “We are pleased and honored that the Ford Foundation has again selected the South Wood County and Rome area to benefit from its generous grant. This is a solid indication of the Ford Foundation’s belief in the Community Progress Initiative and in the residents of our community to work together in planning for the future.”

Loden said, “The funding enables us to continue and enhance programs that will guide and assist citizens in planning for the community’s future – such as identifying and pursuing economic development opportunities, regional planning efforts, and community problem-solving. It is important to look at leadership in communities as a development system, with varying levels of leadership. The

Ford Foundation support allows us to build capacity at multiple levels, from the entry to advanced levels. The first year of the **Advanced Leadership Institute** has shown that people can continue to learn new ways to find collaborative and creative solutions.”

Lucas added, “Effective community building efforts rely on broad participation from all sectors of a community – everyone must have a voice. That’s what the Community Progress Initiative is all about, and the Ford Foundation is showing confidence in our residents to move their community forward.”

The **Ford Foundation** is an independent, nonprofit grant-making organization. For more than half a century it has been a resource for innovative people and institutions worldwide, guided by its goal of strengthening democratic values, reducing poverty and injustice, promoting international cooperation, and advancing human achievement. With headquarters in New York, the foundation has office in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, Latin America and Russia.

The Community Progress Initiative has been recognized internationally as a model in community economic development by the:

- Community Development Society as the *2006 Innovative Project*;
- Small Business Administration as one of 19 *Best Practice* examples, and
- Wisconsin Rural Partners *Top Rural Development Initiative*.

Additional information may be found at [**www.progressinitiative.com**](http://www.progressinitiative.com).

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