

Powers pledge \$15M to keep conversation going

BY SHERRI WELCH
CRAIN'S DETROIT BUSINESS

The **Center for Michigan** plans to launch a new round of community conversations Dec. 1 focused on K-12 education, and ongoing community conversations through 2025, on the strength of a \$15 million commitment from founder Phil Power and his wife, Kathy.

The self-described nonprofit "think-and-do tank" hopes to match that amount by raising \$5 million every five years from other individuals, corporations and foundations.

It has raised \$3.5 million since January. Funders include **Alticor Inc.**, **AT&T Corp. Foundation**, **Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan**, **DTE Energy Foundation**, **Frey Foundation**, **Herbert H. and Grace A. Dow Foundation**, **Masco Corp. Foundation**, **Meijer Corp.**, Michael and Susan Jandernoa, **C.S. Mott Foundation**, **PVS Chemicals Inc.**, **Brooks Family Community Fund**, **Van Dusen Family Fund**, William and Barbara Parfet, and **W.K. Kellogg Foundation**.

The matching funds coupled with the Powers' pledge will give the Center for Michigan a \$2 million annual budget to support both its community engagement work and a new twice-weekly online publication, *Bridge*, launched in September to support that work and to fill the void left as newspapers around the state have cut back on analytical news.

The center's work "is not a flash in the pan, and it isn't idle chatter," said Phil Power, who sold his **HomeTown Communications Network Inc.** community newspaper and telephone directory chain to **Gannett Co. Inc.** in 2005.

The center sees a role for itself in engaging and educating residents in key public issues; providing in-depth reporting, research and publications to help fill the vacuum caused by the decline of traditional journalism; and leading reform efforts by building coalitions and bipartisan efforts in Lansing.

"It became clear in Lansing that the insiders were in a mighty tussle, but we did not sense much discussion with the customers of education: parents, job providers and students themselves," said Executive Director John Bebow. "We think those voices are crucial if the state is going to design an education system in the future that meets its maximum potential."

The model is to take on one big topic per year, he said. Beyond 2012, community conversations will focus on higher education, talent and the college-to-career pathway, and workplace/jobs of the future, before moving on to other issues.

To support its work, the center has hired several former **Booth Newspapers** reporters and other journalists from around the state, adding six new employees to its previous two to work on community engagement and on *Bridge*. It also works with freelance journalists and a dozen or so **Public Sector Consultants** affiliates who help guide the community conversations and analyze the data and responses collected during them.

Power and Bebow said they feel a tremendous responsibility to provide high social return on the investments in the center's work.

Many funders are attracted by



Power



Bebow

the idea of reaching out to Michigan citizens to gauge their views on important topics, Power said, and for the center "to amplify those views and to take them into the corridors

of power to get something done."

Additionally, funders want to ensure that the people participating in community conversations represent all economic, geographic and social groups "because often their views are not taken into consideration," Power said.

The center also will be able to show a return on investment based on the change that comes from its work, Power said, building on the results of its first round of community conversations.

From 2006 through the end of 2009, the center raised \$3.5 million, including \$750,000 from the Powers,

that supported group conversations with more than 10,000 Michigan residents from 2007-2010 and analysis of the most pressing issues for that representative population.

Those conversations resulted in the development of a "Citizens' Agenda," which the center took to political candidates and which led to reforms, including a longer school year and more attention paid to preschool education and the costs of Michigan's prison system.

The return on investment in *Bridge* is readership and change resulting from good journalism, Bebow said. *Bridge*, with just over

12,000 email subscribers now, attracted an average 60,000 page views and 22,000 unique visitors a month in the past eight weeks, he said.

Taylor-based Masco Corp. Foundation, which made a \$250,000 unrestricted grant to the Center for Michigan to support all of its efforts, values its "practical, inclusive approach to identifying a common vision for transforming the state by ensuring that its citizens voices are heard, said President Melonie Colaianne in an email.

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