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# PARTNERSHIP READY: WHAT FOUNDATIONS LOOK FOR IN MUNICIPAL PARTNERS

STEPHEN GOLDSMITH AND KATE MARKIN COLEMAN

 DATA-SMART  
CITY SOLUTIONS

## About the Authors

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He has written *The Power of Social Innovation, Governing by Network: the New Shape of the Public Sector*; *Putting Faith in Neighborhoods: Making Cities Work through Grassroots Citizenship*; *The Twenty-First Century City: Resurrecting Urban America*, *The Responsive City: Engaging Communities Through Data-Smart Governance*; *A New City O/ S: The Power of Open, Collaborative, and Distributed Governance*; and *Collaborative Cities: Mapping Solutions to Wicked Problems*. His most recent book *Growing Fairly: How to Build Opportunity and Equity in Workforce Development*, was released in February 2022.

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Prior to founding her advisory practice, Kate was an Advanced Leadership Fellow (ALI) at Harvard University, and before that, she served as Executive Vice President, Chief Strategy and Advancement Officer for YMCA of the USA. Kate sits on the Advisory Board of NeverTechLate, the board of Social Venture Partners Chicago, and the University of Chicago's Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy, and Practice council. She is also a member of the committee advising the university on the launch of its Leadership and Society Initiative, an ALI-like program. She has served on numerous other social sector, professional, and association boards. She has an MBA and MLA from the University of Chicago.

# About Data-Smart City Solutions

**Data-Smart City Solutions** at the Bloomberg Center for Cities at Harvard University is working to catalyze the adoption of data projects on the local government level by serving as a central resource for city leaders. We highlight best practices, top innovators, and promising case studies while also connecting leading industry, academic, and government officials. Our research focuses on the intersection of government and data and explores innovations in open data, predictive analytics, and civic engagement technology. We seek to discover and preemptively address civic problems by integrating cross-agency data with community data.

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On November 8, 2024, three days after the presidential election, the Bloomberg Center for Cities at Harvard University and The Kresge Foundation brought together the chiefs of staff of the thirty largest U.S. cities for an already scheduled convening. Designed for city leaders interested in partnering with philanthropy, the event focused on the dynamics that shape cross-sector collaboration. The group examined multi-party efforts that address complex, place-based issues, such as neighborhood revitalization.

The convening occurred at a pivotal moment. With the funding landscape uncertain, the chiefs of staff speculated that cities would need to fill in the gaps left by shifting federal policies, a concern that has intensified in the months since. While acknowledging the understandable impulse to use philanthropic resources to backfill cuts in federal funding, the chiefs of staff also recognize that to use donor dollars exclusively to plug losses in government funding jeopardizes investment in long-term, transformational initiatives.

The next several years will usher in a period of disruption, the full effects of which have yet to be determined. Even so, we hope the pressing need to help people and support critical institutions will not diminish interest in public-private partnerships aimed at changing the long-term trajectory of communities. The increasing stress on cities and their most vulnerable residents will, however, put a premium on getting those partnerships right.

Over the last year, we have spoken to dozens of philanthropic and city leaders about their experiences working together to effect place-based change. This paper draws from our interviews and from the results of the November meeting to help cities better understand foundations' perspectives on the goals and factors contributing to successful partnerships. We believe that a clearer understanding of roles and needs, coupled with better goal alignment will create more value at a critical time.

The literature documents a handful of well-known examples of philanthropic entities partnering with cities to address complex local issues. Leading efforts include The Kresge Foundation's role in Detroit's bankruptcy restructuring, and other foundations' work with the Harlem Children's Zone, Strive Together, Purpose Built Communities, and the Dallas Child Poverty Action Lab. Unfortunately, long-term, successful partnerships like these are rare. Changing conditions, leadership turnover, and structural barriers make them difficult, though not impossible, to sustain.

Durable forms of collaboration capable of addressing complex challenges are established through a series of relationship-building steps, often beginning with a partnership between two entities upon which a multi-party collaboration is ultimately built. This paper addresses the first relationship. Specifically, it examines the relationship between a foundation and a city, prior to the establishment of a formal agreement and before the full complement of participants has been assembled.

In a previous book, [Collaborative Cities: Mapping Solutions to Wicked Problems](#), we have written about using data, technology, and visualization tools to power collaboration. In the formative stage of collaboration, geospatial intelligence provides a framework for potential partners to translate their distinct points of view into a mutual understanding of the issues, resources, actors, and gaps in their communities. The process of constructing meaning and defining the problem is essential. It fosters collective agency and lays the groundwork for developing a shared vision, agenda, theory of action, and workable governance structure. Once underway, real-time visualized data helps partners coordinate and sequence the provision of services. Over time, access to shared, dynamic data and ongoing program evaluation enables collaborative structures to adapt and iterate as they learn through experience. While it is essential to use data to shed light on local conditions, it is equally important to understand the individual and institutional contexts within which one's partners operate. When it first arose, we jumped at the opportunity to examine philanthropic partnerships with Rip Rapson, president and CEO of the Kresge Foundation. To explore the question of context, we spoke with leaders of national, local, private, and community foundations, as well as other providers of social impact capital and advice, to gain insight into how they perceive municipal partnerships.

We began by asking foundation leaders about the roles they assume when partnering with cities. Understanding how foundations view themselves helps cities make a stronger case for philanthropy.

Next, we examined the barriers that foundation leaders face when partnering with cities. Cities can preempt foundation concerns by identifying strategies to mitigate these challenges early on and, as necessary, build them into the collaborative task environment.

Finally, to tease out the individual and institutional factors impacting success, we asked, “What, from the foundation’s perspective, makes a broad place-based philanthropic partnership work?”

Clear themes emerged from our conversations. They suggest three overlapping areas of action for cities to take in anticipation of philanthropic partnerships. While these steps are always critical, they’re especially salient in the current environment of federal uncertainty.

1. Using the city’s vision as the starting point, analyze the opportunity from the standpoint of the foundation. Understand both what foundations look for in a municipal partner and the value they believe they bring to the partnership table. Integrate this information into the city’s ask and use it to position the city as a partner capable of affecting change.
2. Anticipate and mitigate hurdles. Consider ways to preempt the operational challenges that foundations report encountering when partnering with cities.
3. Consider conducting a formal readiness assessment. Evaluate the city’s preparedness to partner and remediate where necessary.

Throughout the balance of this paper, quotes indicate language taken directly from our interviews.

## Foundation Roles

Foundation executives repeatedly told us they look for municipal leaders with a compelling vision who can thoughtfully articulate how philanthropy fits into their cities’ priorities. When public officials understand what foundations bring to the table, beyond funding shovel-ready projects, they are better able to frame their ask. This also helps avoid the “foundation as ATM” impression, which several foundations cautioned against.

While only the government has the financial heft, reach, authority, and convening power to effect large-scale change, foundations can play an instrumental role in catalyzing that change. Four areas stand out.

## 1. Capital

Foundations can provide and attract diverse types of capital that, for distinct reasons (regulatory, political, procedural, normative, etc.), the public and private sectors often cannot. These include:

- *Discretionary or flexible capital* to fund programs, initiatives, and talent within government that may fall outside the scope of authorized budgets.
- *Venture capital* that allows municipalities to pilot new initiatives or test emerging ideas without the political constraints or shareholder pressures that make it difficult for the public and private sectors to do so, at least initially.
- *Signaling and stackable capital* that can be used to attract other resources. Foundation grant-making serves as a form of third-party validation, signaling to others (both within and outside the philanthropic community) the value of a particular initiative or investment. As such, philanthropic dollars unlock diverse funding streams, including local and sometimes national capital that would otherwise sit on the sidelines.
- *Patient capital* that can commit to sustained investment in entrenched challenges that require years of effort across multiple political cycles.

## 2. Risk Mitigation

De-risking bold initiatives is one of the most frequently cited benefits of philanthropic capital. Foundations acting as “society’s venture capital” allow cities to test new ideas and unproven approaches without committing public funds upfront. This creates a powerful, politically palatable narrative for mayors to use with constituents and council members regarding the stewardship of public resources in the pilot stages of experimentation. According to one social impact investor, the availability of seed capital (with its “catalytic” intent) creates a path to public investment over time.

Conversely, private grants mitigate the reputational risk associated with failure. Unlike public officials, foundations can sunset initiatives with less political blowback than municipal leaders face.

## 3. Expertise

Most foundations have deep domain-specific expertise grounded in applied research typically related to the programs, approaches, and grantees housed within their

portfolios. This expertise reflects years of grant-making in specific issue areas and engagement with grantees.

In addition, many foundations invest in longitudinal studies, evaluation-based data collection efforts, and development of sophisticated data platforms and conceptual frameworks. They can solicit input from experts across various disciplines and networks, both in academia and through conversations with other funders. As the leader of a large foundation observed, public sector leaders often lack both the time and resources to do so.

#### 4. Bridging Power

Mayors have unique convening powers to mobilize partners around problems. While foundations also possess convening power, more important may be their power to bridge divides between partners. In certain situations, philanthropy occupies a position of trust, standing between sectors that occasionally hold skeptical opinions of one another. For example, the private sector may view public agencies as overly bureaucratic. At the same time, government actors may question corporations' motives. Additionally, as in the case of Detroit's bankruptcy, foundations can provide a bridge within the philanthropic community. By communicating an expectation of shared responsibility, they encourage multiple funders to underwrite a particular issue.

Using their bridging power, foundation boards and their community stakeholders provide essential scaffolding for the public, private, and social sectors to advance a shared important goal. As the president of a large national foundation stated, "Foundations can credibly encourage cross-sector collaboration, whether through their convening power, the contacts they have in different communities, or their experience coordinating institutions and actors in all three sectors."

Implicit in all four of the roles described above is a degree of flexibility and freedom rarely afforded municipal officials. In a partnership that leverages each participant's complementary strengths, foundations can help mitigate some of the constraints that control government actions. For instance, philanthropic partners typically have greater budgetary latitude than public agencies. Foundations can allocate funds dynamically if necessary. The government, on the other hand, is subject to statutory restrictions that limit when and to what funds may be allocated.

Additionally, city officials operate within a complex authorizing environment that involves the mayor, city council, neighborhood constituencies, and legal constraints. Philanthropy, on the other hand, has fewer competing accountabilities and constituencies and is less subject to daily fire drills. To paraphrase one foundation leader, “it’s easier for us to focus on and form coalitions supporting politically sensitive or “gnarly” issues.”

City leaders pursuing bold solutions often seek a philanthropic partner, such as a community foundation, a large locally based foundation, or a national foundation active in the relevant subject area. When conceptualizing their ask, public officials need to consider the possible roles that a foundation could play. This is important for two reasons. Effective relationships leverage the strengths each partner brings to the table, such that the impact of the whole is greater than the sum of the individual parts. Additionally, foundations want to know that potential municipal partners are both thoughtful and strategic in their approach to the resources necessary to address complex issues.

## Partnership Challenges

Governmental entities face a host of regulatory, budgetary, political, and other structural constraints that affect their ability to partner with foundations, and by extension, complicate those relationships. Cities need to acknowledge these challenges and take steps to address them. The following challenges are those most frequently cited by foundation leaders.

### 1. Limited Capacity and Enabling Infrastructure

Two overlapping capacity issues were cited frequently by the foundations we interviewed. First, many city agencies lack the infrastructure required to accept and manage grants or other forms of private funding. For some foundations, the absence of a dedicated grants management office to coordinate and troubleshoot partnership-related issues can be a deal breaker. Moreover, few mayors appoint a staff member with the requisite training and experience to serve as a primary liaison with donors, leading to a mismatch in expectations and communication.

Notably, several of the foundation executives we interviewed observed that years of fiscal austerity in city halls have “hollowed out mid-level personnel,” leaving behind

administrative and frontline staff, but few individuals with the “design and implementation capacity necessary to operationalize great ideas.” This gap poses a significant challenge, given the complexity of the issues that municipalities seek philanthropic partners for.

Funders and their city partners address capacity challenges in various ways. Some embed fellows, technical advisors, and specially assigned career staff within lead agencies. Others fund data infrastructure and/or third-party intermediaries to facilitate collaboration, house data, and hold the system accountable. Most strongly encourage the formation of a grants management office and assigning an internal liaison to the partnership.

While capacity varies across municipalities, cities must assess their current standing to address internal gaps or work with their foundation partners to fill in necessary gaps.

## 2. Leader-Centered Initiatives and Sustainability

Many factors affect the sustainability of philanthropic–municipal partnerships. Among the most frequently cited challenges identified by foundation officials is leadership transition. Partnerships that are closely tied to a specific mayor or administration risk losing momentum following an election. Political change creates vulnerabilities as new leaders typically assume office with unique priorities and campaign commitments. Long-term initiatives are particularly susceptible to disruption due to shifting agendas and the immediate pressures confronting incoming administrations. (Leadership changes within foundations can also complicate relationships).

The city officials and philanthropic leaders we convened identified the following strategies to mitigate risk and to institutionalize effective initiatives. They include:

- Embedding implementation authority and responsibility with career agency or departmental staff.
- Creating transition arrangements upfront, such that cities agree to fund initiatives for a fixed period through their annual budget process once proof of concept has been established.
- Adopting naming conventions that decouple initiatives from a specific elected official’s name.

- Utilization of third-party champions and intermediaries to facilitate ongoing execution.
- Thinking strategically about timing. While there was disagreement regarding this recommendation, some foundation leaders suggested “Spending time with the people running for office,” noting that “mayors have to keep their campaign promises.”

### 3. Bureaucratic Hurdles and Structural Impediments

Foundations and cities recognize that doing new things can be difficult. Inflexible procurement rules, licensing and permit requirements, budgeting constraints, hiring restrictions, and contracting authority can create implementation barriers. Deviating from established processes and norms is difficult and time-consuming.

Although fully rewiring local government processes is unrealistic, foundations stress the importance of “bold” municipal leadership willing to invest political capital in removing bureaucratic obstacles. Many recommend that this be done early or as a condition of partnership. Several foundations suggest that it is easier for a mayor “to clear the bureaucratic path” at the beginning of their term than later. Other foundations map the policies and procedures they believe most likely to create barriers and work with municipal leadership to unfurl them.

Structural silos challenge collaborations that address complex place-based issues, because people experience problems where they live, not in any one government agency. For example, multiple states have instituted children’s cabinets to bridge structural silos. “One-government” and “all-hands government” efforts use a cross-agency governance structure to align the actions of participating agencies. Under cabinet leadership, the agencies adopt shared goals and coordinate activities to support these objectives. In speaking of the state of Maryland’s Children’s Cabinet, chaired by the Special Secretary of the Governor’s Office for Children, one foundation executive said, “...by understanding the silos within government, we can find ways of bridging things together, which feels like a critical step in getting things done and transforming government.”

For city leaders, the one-government approach provides a starting point for operationalizing coordination across departments and agencies.

#### 4. Mindset

In interview sessions, foundation leaders candidly discussed the “mindset” challenges they sometimes encounter in government. A category as subjective as mindset carries the risk of stereotyping, yet we share what we heard for two reasons. First, mindset challenges were mentioned with sufficient frequency that they represent, if not reality, then a facsimile of reality with which cities must deal. Second, understanding how they *may* be perceived allows local leaders to act and position themselves in ways that counter preconceived notions.

We interviewed a diverse range of foundation leaders who are proud of their work with cities and their ability to structure major initiatives. Yet even those officials bristle at narrow conceptions of their role. “Too often, cities come to us with an ‘ATM’ rather than a ‘systems change’ mentality.” The ATM analogy reflects transactional rather than strategic thinking about the potential associated with multi-sector partnerships that include foundations.

One foundation leader used extreme language to describe what they called “vision scarcity” in government. Similarly, others described government leaders as “lacking vision” about what is possible. Yet another foundation executive noted, “We always begin with a planning process because most cities don’t think big; they are rooted in the barriers they face. We start with a planning process to make space for folks to shift their mindset about what it takes to drive change...to dream beyond their wildest imagination.”

If cities operate in a “reactive” rather than a strategic mode, it is mainly because officials “look at problems in terms of election cycles.” Their short-term focus on “fixing the most immediate problems” and responding to the “current crisis” can be at odds with many foundations’ interests in supporting transformational partnerships.

That cities are risk-averse is neither unexpected nor necessarily unreasonable. Innovation, new ideas, and big bets are as likely to be penalized as rewarded. They create “headline risk and stifle the appetite to go big,” according to one philanthropic leader. Ambitious plans require tangible milestones, which entail reputational risk that city leaders may not be willing to take on or may obstruct. While risk aversion is understandable, foundation risk capital (non-taxpayer dollars) gives municipal partners the space and narrative to experiment.

## Foundation Tips for Cities on What Works

Toward the end of each interview, we asked foundation leaders what they look for in a municipal partner. Our goal was to transition from a deficit-based to an asset-based perspective and to tease out language for cities seeking to develop compelling narratives and action plans in anticipation of partnership. Distilled into a single sentence, they seek a strong leader with a compelling vision who will take the necessary steps to make the partnership work within local government and with external stakeholders. Below, we look at each of those components.



### Vision and Strategic Alignment

Although most major funders entertain stopgap, one-off requests for support, their interest in them is limited. The foundations with whom we spoke are more interested in addressing complex, place-based challenges. The case for partnering with municipalities to address these challenges and achieve broader goals is compelling, particularly when it reflects a clearly defined vision anchored in the mayor's priorities.

While it may seem self-evident, foundation leaders repeatedly underscored the importance of municipal partners who speak with conviction about their agenda and offer a coherent narrative about how philanthropy fits into their vision. Equally important is the mayor's ability to communicate their vision in a way that "gets others behind them" and demonstrates awareness of organizations whose current work would affect implementation.

From this core, strong partnerships take shape through a process of alignment that identifies common goals and "shared milestones." As one foundation leader said, "Like any partnership, this work is about identifying shared goals and figuring out what each partner brings to the table." Said another, "The most promising arrangements suggest a kind of reverse engineering: first clarifying what we want to accomplish, then working backward to assemble the right players equipped with the right tools—applied in the right proportions, in the right sequence, at the right pace."

The clarity and discipline implied above are not easily achieved. They ask city leaders to take risks, challenge norms, and upend standard ways of operating. This requires strong leadership, a key attribute that foundations seek in municipal partners.



## Leadership (Credible, Strong, Bold)

Leadership matters. Perhaps more than anything else. “It always comes down to leadership,” one foundation executive told us. “Without the right leader, you can try, but it is much harder. The rock becomes square, and it is tough to push uphill.”

Demonstrably effective municipal leadership is both an indicator of a city’s readiness to collaborate and a linchpin of partnership success. Foundations seek out municipal leaders who “get the mechanics of collaboration.” This includes addressing the internal barriers that impede collaboration, “fixing the unsexy [bureaucratic] stuff,” establishing a grants management office, and assigning someone to the position of partnership liaison.

Equally important, foundations value leaders willing to delegate and embed implementation authority within agencies and departments. Effective delegation helps ensure continuity in the face of electoral change and creates “internal champions with the inclination and bandwidth to move things forward.” At the same time, leaders at all levels must be clear about what they can and cannot control, as well as what they can and cannot commit to. “Knowing that someone will deliver what they say and will not commit to something they cannot deliver makes the biggest difference,” observed one foundation official.

The final set of characteristics that foundations associate with strong leaders and, therefore, preferred partners, is less tangible but no less critical. Bold leaders have an appetite for calculated risk. They innovate. They pilot new ideas, often with the support of philanthropic risk capital. They iterate using what they learn from experience. “They think long-term and are open to committing city resources to what works.” They have a collaborative mindset, are open to feedback, and value shared governance and mutual accountability. Almost by definition, funders make major philanthropic gifts to create change in the status quo; therefore, they depend on cooperation, which includes a willingness to modify existing processes.



## Strong Relationships and Situational Awareness

Mayors are uniquely positioned to convene stakeholders across communities and sectors. The ability to translate convening power into both commitment and action distinguishes successful partnerships from others.

Funders and civic partners look for mayors and chief executives whose actions “signal they can be trusted partners, leaders who others want to work with.” This trust is rooted in both reputation and conduct. It is central to relational capital, a key requirement for effective multi-sector partnerships. Relational capital, as defined here, encompasses a broad network of relationships within city and county governments, among community-based organizations, and across the nonprofit, private, and philanthropic sectors. Importantly, it assumes these relations are “productive, positive, and not adversarial.”

In addition to trust and network relationships, foundation leaders described several characteristics that can be grouped under the category of situational awareness. They emphasized the importance of municipal partners who can navigate politics, whether at the neighborhood level, among nonprofits, or within the city council. Political skills are crucial for mobilizing support and mitigating potential friction points in any partnership.

Another aspect of situational awareness is knowledge of the local ecosystem. This includes mapping pressing issues and key stakeholders, as well as assessing the availability and access to existing resources or initiatives. Leaders who can situate a potential partnership within the broader landscape and are willing to build upon and strengthen existing efforts create more durable and effective collaborations. Instead of forming another one-off partnership, they create scaffolding that leverages what is already in motion, reinforces what works, and demonstrates a willingness to call out what is not.

The word “galvanize” frequently appeared in our conversations regarding community awareness and buy-in. One foundation executive summed it up nicely: “Mayors who know how to activate the full range of levers available are especially effective.” These levers include convening power, legislative tools, knowledge-based and financial assets,

business and philanthropic connections, and narrative. The latter is the ability to marry others' work into a common vision and, ultimately, shared goals.

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## Readiness Assessment

When at the national office of a large, federated organization, one of us authors, Kate Coleman, established an internal foundation to scale evidence-informed programs across the network's local affiliates. As these programs required specific competencies and issue-relevant community relationships, the central office developed readiness assessment protocols to determine whether different sites were prepared to offer the programs successfully.

The same type of structured evaluation applies here. We believe mayors should think about formally evaluating their city's readiness to establish a major philanthropic partnership. Three of the more than twenty foundations we interviewed are in the early stages of developing their own readiness assessments. Others shared examples of the questions they ask of cities or that they consider when making decisions.

Below, we present potential areas for evaluation. Although more comprehensive than necessary, they serve as a starting point and capture ideas that surfaced in our conversations.

### Vision and Strategic Alignment

- Clarity
  - Does city leadership have a compelling vision for change?
  - Does the vision reflect a willingness to “dream beyond constraints”?
- Desired Outcomes
  - Can leadership identify the “bigger pieces” required to achieve its vision?
  - Does the city have, or can it develop, comprehensive plans outlining the “how” and the cost implications of its desired outcomes?
  - Have officials broken down the vision into intermediate objectives and milestones?
  - Is the city willing to commit to measurable outcomes?
- Priorities and Partnership Case

- Do the city’s priority areas align with community needs?
- Do they align with the philanthropy’s program areas?
- Is there a coherent narrative that explains how philanthropy fits into the city’s vision?
- Does this narrative incorporate the roles foundations see themselves playing in partnership with cities?
- Evidence of Effectiveness
  - Does the city have a track record of similar successful initiatives?
  - Can it call up “examples of similar efforts in other places” that have yielded measurable impact?
  - Is the city positioned as a potential model for other cities to emulate, increasing its attractiveness as a philanthropic partner with broader portfolio significance for funders?

## Leadership

- Support
  - Are the mayor, senior officials, and relevant department heads committed to pursuing cross-sector collaboration?
  - Is leadership prepared to act with a sense of urgency and take decisive steps toward change?
- Delegation
  - Is leadership willing to delegate authority and responsibility to career staff to ensure continuity?
  - Do career staff members have the bandwidth and skills necessary to execute?
  - Is leadership willing to empower staff to “lead the shifts required” to drive outcomes and minimize hurdles?
- Mindset
  - Is leadership open to new ideas, or has leadership created an environment that allows staff to take risks and possibly fail?
  - Do leaders understand how to utilize data to inform their strategy and measure its impact?
  - Is there capacity to adopt systematic frameworks like “cradle-to-career continuums” or other outcome-oriented models?
  - Are leaders prepared to analyze the scope of challenges, quantify needs, and assess “what it truly takes” (financially and operationally) to achieve desired outcomes?

- Is the city committed to learning, data-driven evaluation, and iterative improvement?
- Is the city prepared to communicate candidly with partners, including about failures, lessons learned, and course corrections?

### Internal Capacity, Infrastructure and Structural Barriers

- Grants Management and Compliance
  - Does the city have systems to accept, manage, and report on private or philanthropic funds?
  - Does the city have or is it prepared to set up a grants management function? A partnership liaison?
  - Has the city documented legal rules and ethical constraints governing philanthropic engagement?
  - Are there established, documented and accessible protocols for who may solicit funds, how funds are managed, and how conflicts of interest are handled?
- Data and Evaluation Infrastructure
  - Does the city have the systems to collect, analyze, and share data relevant to partnership work?
  - Can data be used to identify gaps, evaluate program outcomes, and build accountability structures?
- Structural Hurdles and Process Mapping
  - Is there clarity around operational trade-offs or policy changes required to make a partnership successful (e.g., revisiting processes that slow down implementation)?
  - Has the city identified bureaucratic hurdles that could hinder partnerships (e.g., procurement rules, contracting limitations, hiring practices)?
  - Is leadership willing to address these bureaucratic hurdles where possible and early on?
  - Is the city willing to designate a lawyer who can quickly solve issues?
- Cross-Agency Coordination
  - Are there (or is the city willing to create) cross-departmental structures, such as children's cabinets or task forces, to coordinate complex initiatives?
  - Has the city identified structural silos that could impede integrated problem-solving?
  - Are there plans to bridge these silos? Is the city open to an "all-hands government" approach?

## Landscape Awareness and Stakeholder Capital

- Issue Ecosystem
  - Has the city mapped (issue-relevant) effective programs, initiatives, and funding flows already in place?
  - Has the city identified (issue-relevant) gaps in services or funding, and where municipal action and philanthropic investment could have a meaningful impact?
  - Has the city assessed how municipal action and philanthropy can build upon, rather than duplicate, existing investments?
- Landscape of Partners
  - Has the city assessed what other foundations and sources of funding are investing in relevant issue areas?
  - Does the city know whether philanthropic actors have developed citywide strategic investment plans, roadmaps, or initiatives the city should align with?
  - Does the city have a current relationship with the local community foundation?
- Stakeholder Engagement and Politics
  - Does the city maintain other relevant relationships across public, private, and nonprofit sectors? Which and how strong?
  - Has the city had conversations with existing partners to explore alignment?
  - Has the city engaged community-based organizations, residents, and other civic actors to co-create solutions?
  - Is there evidence of community buy-in for proposed initiatives?
  - Does the city have strategies to “galvanize broad-based support so that stakeholders see themselves as part of a shared vision?”
  - Does leadership understand political dynamics and stakeholder interests critical to partnership success?
- Third-Party Intermediaries
  - Is the city open to using third-party entities (e.g., fiscal sponsors, community foundations, intermediaries) to manage funds or facilitate coordination?
  - Has the city explored whether its local community foundation or specific other entities could serve as fiscal sponsors?

## Sustainability

- Sustainability Planning
  - Has the city realistically assessed its financial capacity/limitations?

- Is the city willing to consider agreeing to upfront agreements such that if an initiative proves successful, the city will provide ongoing support?
  - Naming Considerations
    - Is leadership willing to consider naming conventions that do not tie the initiative to a particular leader?
  - Timing
    - Does city leadership have a point of view regarding the best time to plan and launch a new initiative in partnership with philanthropy?
    - Before an election, so that the initiative can be integrated into campaign commitments.
    - Early in a new mayor's term, when political capital and momentum are at their highest.
    - Later in the administration, when there are fewer competing priorities for the mayor's attention.
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As we wrote in [\*Collaborative Cities\*](#):

*We have long believed that 'wicked problems' or 'grand challenges' exceed the capacity of any one sector or set of actors. Instead, they demand the kind of creative thinking, democratized engagement and integrated action that best happens across boundaries, when government, nonprofits, businesses and citizens work in concert...And yet we are acutely aware how difficult it is to collaborate across sectors effectively.*

In the nearly four years since that book was published, nothing has diminished our conviction in the potential of cross-sector collaboration to positively affect outcomes in areas as diverse as workforce development and homelessness. Indeed, given the pressures facing cities today, we believe it is more important than ever. In his work with mayors, one of us authors, Stephen Goldsmith, frequently encounters the trade-offs involved in doing more with less.

While not every cross-sector collaboration starts with a partnership between a city and a foundation, such pairings often set the stage for broader cooperation. Recognizing the catalytic potential of partnerships between municipal government and philanthropy, this paper explores the factors that contribute to their success. As we are writing

primarily for a public sector audience, we have focused on what a city can do to both position and prepare itself for partnership.

The next decade will challenge mayors, the cities they lead, and the people they serve. Thoughtful collaboration that leverages the strengths of the public, private, social, and civic sectors is not the only answer to the issues confronting cities. Still, we maintain it is a critical part of the answer, and one that will support cities and residents in the uncertain years to come.



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