

Recession spurs change at environmental group

Ret Boney | May 14, 2010



Julie Mayfield

[Editor's note: This article is the third in a PJ series on how North Carolina nonprofits are coping with the lingering effects of the recession, and how funders are supporting their work.]

ASHEVILLE, N.C. - The executive director of the Western North Carolina Alliance stepped down in February of 2008, leaving the position open for three months.

Julie Mayfield stepped in to fill the void for the grassroots environmental group in June 2008, just four months before the bottom fell out of the economy.

"It was not a great time to be new to a state and new to funders and try to raise money," says Mayfield, who came to the Alliance from Georgia, where she worked with another environmental group.

The organization is on sound footing now, and even in talks with five other local environmental groups about sharing space and services.

But early in her tenure, the double blow of the leadership transition and the recession meant lost grants and a brutal fundraising year for the organization, which works to help citizens become advocates for the environment and livable communities.

The Alliance finished 2008 with a \$35,000 deficit.

So Mayfield rang in the new year by slashing expenses, including laying off a staffer, cutting remaining salaries by 10 percent and shifting the group's newsletter from paper to email.

"We literally didn't spend any money we didn't have to spend," says Mayfield, noting that when the organization ran out of white copy paper, it began using leftover colored paper, cutting 11-inch-by-17-inch pieces in half when the its letter-size stash ran out.

And it launched a strategic planning process that resulted in a detailed operating plan and individual work plans for its four full-time employees and its VISTA volunteer.

"It was a very tense year with lots of peaks and valleys in the cash-flow cycle," says Mayfield.

But the organization was able to land grants from new funders, win a statewide award that included \$10,000, resume its fundraising events and land some fee-for-service work from the U.S. Forest Service.

The refocused and reenergized Alliance finished 2009 with a \$35,000 surplus and now has an operating budget of about \$310,000.

"Things are great right now," says Mayfield. "We're in a solid place financially. And we didn't have to chase the money or go outside of our mission."

But all the soul-searching led Mayfield to consider whether there was even more the Alliance should be doing.

Last summer she initiated a conversation with about 40 environmental groups in western North Carolina to gauge interest in working together and sharing costs.

Using a facilitator provided by Western North Carolina Nonprofit Pathways, a group that works to build the capacity of local nonprofits, the conversation eventually led to more formal discussions among six groups -- the Alliance, Southern Environmental Law Center, Wild South, Southern Appalachian Forest Coalition, Dogwood Alliance and SouthWings.

With a \$7,500 grant from the Community Foundation of Western North Carolina, a team of two consultants conducted an in-depth financial and operational analysis of each group to determine the benefits of sharing space, equipment and services.

That investigation and data-crunching process is almost complete and the consultants are beginning to look for space the groups could rent or even own, and hope to have a location identified within the next few months.

At a recent meeting, the groups discussed critical topics like timing and other important issues, including whether employees would be able to bring their dogs to work, as they do currently.

But with a total of 16 dogs among 25 employees, "that's not an office, it's a kennel," jokes Mayfield, as a dog barks in the background.

For now, the organizations would retain their separate organizational identities, but would share space, rental expenses and office equipment, and perhaps realize some programmatic benefits.

"It would let us be smarter about how we get the work done," she says. "And one of my goals is to increase our advocacy power. If coming together increases our power to influence policy, then that's always something I'm going to look at."

While the recession was difficult for the Alliance, and for other grassroots groups, it's possible the downturn prompted nonprofits to consider some changes that ultimately will be beneficial, says Mayfield.

"The recession has forced groups to get focused and serious about their missions and trimming extraneous work that might have been interesting but wasn't part of the core mission," she says. "And it's forcing groups to work together more. We couldn't have had these conversations when times are good."

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