

The Detroit News

Foundations' group effort paying off for Belle Isle

Jennifer Chambers, May 3, 2015



(Photo: Todd McInturf / The Detroit News)

Grants from Michigan foundations are flowing to the Belle Isle Conservancy to shape future investments on the island and boost revitalization plans.

Philanthropic support has been pouring into the conservancy since it was created in 2011, the year four longtime park advocacy agencies — Belle Isle Women's Committee, Belle Isle Botanical Society, Friends of Belle Isle and the Friends of Belle Isle Aquarium — merged to form the conservancy.

Giving by foundations and other sources to strengthen the conservancy increased substantially in 2013 and 2014. It received three major grants in 2013 and an additional nine in 2014.

All were focused on positioning the conservancy to better take on challenges on the island — which became a state park in 2014 and is larger than New York's Central Park — and raise additional funds on its own.

Last month, with financial support from foundations, the state and the conservancy itself, a \$110,000 strategic planning process was launched to decide where investments should be made on the 985-acre island managed by the state.

Michele Hodges, president of the Belle Isle Conservancy, said the plan is considering all the assets on the island — Belle Isle Aquarium, Scripps Whitcomb Conservatory, the Dossin Great Lakes Museum and the Belle Isle Nature Zoo — and how they can be used for programs, in some cases jointly.

Meanwhile, a six-month study is underway to make recommendations for a cultural campus plan, with a main focus on the aquarium and conservatory. The study, which costs \$100,000, also will look at operations at the museum and the zoo. Both efforts are expected to wrap up by fall, Hodges said.

Since 2013, the Kresge Foundation has awarded the conservancy \$335,000 for operations and development of the cultural campus plan. The Hudson-Webber Foundation has given \$260,000 to support strategic planning to determine early investments.

Other grants have come from the Michigan State Housing Development Authority's State Historic Preservation office, the Knight Foundation and the state Department of Natural Resources.

"We have tremendous support from the community, but we don't have the benefit of data. We haven't had a plan or strategy to guide us down the path," Hodges said. "We are 3 years old. We see this as liberating, and the donor community embraces it as well. They want to know they are investing in a long-term plan."

The conservancy hired New York-based Biederman Redevelopment Ventures, which redeveloped Bryant Park in Manhattan and turned the urban park into model of revitalization, for a six-month strategic planning effort. For the cultural campus plan, which will assess current operations and create new recommendations, it hired Detroit-based Albert Kahn Associates Inc.

Laura Trudeau, Kresge managing director for Detroit and community programs, said she has been impressed with how the four volunteer groups on Belle Isle came together to form a unified conservancy.

Laying the groundwork for investment has foundations excited and motivated to give. "They have the ability to raise money in a coordinated way and take on projects that smaller friends organizations just don't have. That provides a platform for philanthropy to get involved," Trudeau said.

Kresge has an active proposal from the conservancy for \$100,000 that is under consideration. Trudeau said recently she normally doesn't talk about unapproved grants.

"But we are very confident we will continue planning and capacity building with the Belle Isle Conservancy. We just feel the conservancy and the island have a tremendous history. The

sites are a concentration area for visitors on the island. They need to be physically invested in. That is something Kresge wants to do.”

Ron Olson, chief of the Parks and Recreation division at the state Department of Natural Resources, said the office is an active partner in the process underway at the park, which opened in 1884.

“The questions being explored will address what is going to be necessary to make sure the culture and historical integrity is sustained on the island, as well as what is the appropriate future of the old zoo. What are ideas that can be done there?” Olson said.

“In the end we are ultimately responsible for the island. It will be collaborative effort together, not so much an approval of things. It depends on how far reaching the plan is. We are in it for 30 years,” he said.

The state assumed management of the island under a 30-year lease with the city of Detroit in 2014. Hodges said while the conservancy doesn’t have a “vision-making authority,” it has a very strong advisory role.

“The conservancy brings financial support, fiduciary support. We expect to do a lot of capital improvements,” she said, while the DNR covers day-to-day costs.

Hodges said once the study and plan are done, the conservancy will hold workshops and town hall gatherings to discuss them.

“We see success,” Hodges said. “It’s tantalizing to think about the success that awaits our community. The spirit of Detroit is alive and well, and we are going for it.”

Park plans

The Belle Isle Conservancy has received grants from foundations and other sources for a cultural campus plan and a strategic plan. Both efforts are expected to wrap up by fall with a town hall to unveil the proposals.

The \$100,000 Cultural Campus Plan is being funded by: \$35,000 from the Kresge Foundation, \$50,000 from the Department of Natural Resources and \$15,000 from the BIC to leverage DNR’s full \$50,000 support.

The \$110,000 Strategic Planning Process is being funded by: \$40,000 from the Hudson-Webber Foundation, \$30,000 from the Knight Foundation Fund of the Community Foundation, \$25,000 from the DNR and \$15,000 from Kresge.

Source: Belle Isle Conservancy