



Learning from a Disappointing Project

An unsuccessful effort to build a statewide environmental advocacy coalition

This example offers insight into a funding strategy that did not pan out as expected. Florida was one of five "key states" where the Beldon Fund sought to build support for sound environmental policies by creating a statewide advocacy coalition united around a common agenda. The strategy achieved varying levels of success in Wisconsin, Michigan, Minnesota, and North Carolina. But Florida was a different story. Beldon faced tougher problems that eventually defeated its effort to promote change.

We hope the lessons from this experience - about understanding the full scope of challenges, setting realistic expectations, and developing an appropriate strategy - will be useful to other foundations that have or are developing state-based advocacy programs.

Theory of Change

Beldon's decision in 2000 to invest in Florida's environmental movement was based on several promising factors. First, the state was known to have a strong bi-partisan environmental ethic - the public, media, and politicians paid a lot of attention to environmental issues. Second, Florida was a wealthy state with a large pool of donors Beldon hoped to engage in supporting efforts to strengthen environmental advocacy. Finally, by virtue of its size Florida was an influential state with the potential to affect national environmental policies.

Implementation

On the ground, Beldon discovered that the promising conditions it initially identified were no match for the problems it encountered. A number of complicating factors specific to Florida contributed to the disappointing results. These realities would have required different strategies than Beldon had used with more success in other states, and a different set of expectations.

Challenges

1. **Size:** Beldon underestimated the challenge presented by the sheer size of the state. Florida is four times larger than Minnesota, with two time zones and 11 media markets. It was difficult and costly just to bring people together in one place, and even more daunting to try to build a statewide advocacy infrastructure.
2. **Demographics:** Florida's demographic diversity posed another challenge. A large proportion of residents are seasonal or new transplants with, typically, less interest in state policy issues. Environmentalists had done little to engage groups with deeper roots in the state, such as the large Latino community.
3. **Divisions:** Beldon knew from the beginning that internal divisions had weakened Florida's environmental movement. The major split was between the powerful land acquisition conservationists and the smaller, under-funded groups working on pollution and chemical toxins

4. regulation. Even among the smaller groups there was infighting that prevented alliances. After trying for several years to bridge these divides, it became clear that the distrust within the environmental community was much deeper than anticipated.
5. **Leadership gap:** Despite these difficulties, Beldon hoped to find a few strong leaders and advocacy groups to work with successfully. In particular, the foundation sought to transform the state chapter of the League of Conservation Voters into an anchor organization that could play a neutral convening and coordinating role – a tactic that worked well in some of its other states. But after three unsuccessful attempts to find the right leadership, Beldon switched its strategy.
6. **A common issue campaign is unsuccessful:** The foundation tried another approach to bring the state’s environmental groups together – uniting them around a shared policy issue. Beldon supported the Florida Water Coalition, hoping it would encourage a cross-section of advocates to collaborate. Unfortunately, the coalition made little progress and after three years the foundation ended its support.
7. **Lack of collaborative infrastructure:** Unlike most of the other states Beldon worked in, Florida lacked a network of advocacy organizations or a central hub that could bring groups together on policy issues. When it became clear that environmental advocates were not going to unite around a common agenda, Beldon helped get a broader collaboration of advocacy groups with compatible policy agendas off the ground. This particular effort paid off. The multi-issue 501(c)(3) hub, which focuses on nonpartisan public mobilization, continues to be active today.
8. **Failure to engage major state-based funders:** Beldon had hoped to engage large local donors in the effort to build a statewide environmental coalition. While it managed to gain support from a few smaller foundations, it did not succeed in engaging Florida’s larger donors - who mostly fund national, rather than state-based, organizations and campaigns. As a result, the project lacked the magnitude of funding necessary to create an impact in a state of that size.
9. **Difficult policy environment:** Finally, Beldon began its work at a time when Florida’s policy dynamic was shifting. The newly elected governor proved unfriendly to environmental protection. At the same time, there was little support from other policymakers for initiating environmental policy reform.

Adjusting Course

Given the “trial and error” nature of social change advocacy, the Beldon Fund had a policy of sticking with grantees over the long term. But as a spend-out foundation with a ten-year time horizon, Beldon had a smaller margin of error – if a project clearly was not working, it moved quickly to adjust course.

Despite its multiple efforts in Florida, Beldon was not able to develop the kind of environmental coalition that emerged in its other states. After six years of trying different strategies with frustrating results and no sign of progress, the foundation reluctantly decided to phase out its funding. But there was one positive outcome with lasting impact: The multi-issue coalition of advocacy groups Beldon helped create continues to be active and it served as a model for Beldon’s coalition-building work in other states.

Lessons and Tips: Developing a state- based advocacy program

1. **Conduct a thorough scoping of the challenges and opportunities to bring change in the state.** Beldon felt it understood the conditions it would face in Florida and the potential for change. On the ground, however, the foundation discovered it had underestimated the difficulties it would encounter.
2. **Set realistic expectations and develop an appropriate strategy.** Beldon sought to have a statewide impact in Florida. But given the size of the state, the divisions within the environmental community, the lack of an infrastructure for collaboration, and the level of funds required to accomplish this ambitious goal, it might have been wiser to focus on a few specific areas of the state and, if successful, to eventually scale up.
3. **Assess in advance the feasibility of engaging other funders in this work and take time to build these relationships.** Beldon had counted on engaging Florida's large donors in supporting efforts to build a strong environmental advocacy coalition. While it succeeded in bringing some smaller foundations on board, it discovered that most of the larger donors tend to give to national projects outside their state.
4. **Identify strong leaders and support them to be successful.** Beldon did not find the leadership that could anchor and advance coalition-building work.
5. **Be flexible – there is no cookie cutter model.** Beldon's strategy in its key states continually evolved to address the specific dynamics it encountered in each state.
6. **Establish benchmarks, assess at frequent intervals what's working well and less well, and adjust strategy accordingly.** Beldon tried a range of strategies to build a strong environmental coalition in Florida. But given its comparatively short time horizon, the foundation could not afford to maintain this commitment without some encouraging signs of progress. When it became clear after six years that this work was unlikely to bring even gradual change, the foundation phased out its funding.