

The Community Foundation of Tompkins County
Critical Issues Roundtable: Family & Children's Service of Ithaca
October 15, 2003

The Community Foundation of Tompkins County held its first Critical Issues Roundtable on October 15, 2003, at the Clarion Conference Center in Ithaca, New York. Co-hosting the event was The Atlantic Philanthropies (USA), Inc. For over 20 years, Atlantic Philanthropies has contributed to community programs, education, and the quality of life we enjoy in Tompkins County. For the Community Foundation, Atlantic has been a special partner in our creation and through our first few years of operation.

The 2003-2004 Critical Issues Roundtable is a series of community-focused meetings hosted by the Community Foundation. Each Roundtable features a strategic community topic that addresses the quality of life for those who work and live in Tompkins County. The topics may be central to one organization or sector of the community, or they might be overarching topics that impact the entire community. The roundtables target thought-provoking discussions that will produce more effective strategic decision-making and planning practices, promoting positive results for our communities while fostering enlightened philanthropy.

The topic for the October 15 Roundtable featured Family & Children's Service of Ithaca as they consider the creation of a new facility. The agency can either build a facility for itself or it can use this opportunity to serve as lead organizer for a facility that will house multiple service agencies. The results of this decision will have broad consequences for the quality of human services available to the people of Tompkins County.

More than 70 community leaders participated in the breakfast meeting. The program had two parts: a brief overview of F&CS' 130-year history to Tompkins County and then a panel discussion focusing on the pros and cons of the decision facing F&CS. Representing F&CS were Board members Guy DiCicco, Carolyn Newman, and George Schuler, and agency president and CEO Jim Johnston. Serving as hosts and moderators were Ted Hullar from Atlantic Philanthropies and Community Foundation representatives: Eric Clay, Grants Chairperson, and Peg Hendricks, Executive Director.

Main points of the F&CS' presentation included:

- F&CS exists to enhance the quality of life within the Ithaca Region by being a leading provider of accessible mental health care and related services to all community members, particularly the needs of children.
- Over the past century, F&CS has initiated and spun off many services in the community as well as merged with service providers or absorbed their services, when appropriate.
- The current environment is one of decline in funding from all sources, increased demand for services, need for greater operational efficiencies, and potential loss of services to the community.
- F&CS will engage an architect to begin designing a building by the end of the year. That building can be primarily for F&CS or for many service agencies.

- There are a variety of models from upstate New York and elsewhere, reflecting how service agencies may collocate or collaborate in common service facilities.
- In a point-counterpoint, the presenters reviewed the pros and cons of building a facility for F&CS and of building a multi-agency facility.

A general question-and-answer period followed the presentation. Program results and feedback were gathered through evaluation/response forms, which indicated that:

- Nearly half were unsure what direction F&CS should pursue while the other half were convinced by the presentation that the community needs a multi-agency facility. Only two were certain that going forward was not desirable.
- Three quarters of those who responded indicated they would support a multi-agency facility if it were a community goal. Again, three quarters endorsed F&CS's leadership in such an effort.
- Community participants wanted more information regarding overall costs, total square footage, parking, rental fees, ownership arrangements, financing options, and current and future collaboration opportunities.
- Participants were interested in the possibilities for collaborations, wanting to know more about how and in what context F&CS would work with partners-as-equals/co-owners as well as with other service agencies and client constituencies.
- Several recommended that F&CS should work with a professional developer, suggesting that this relationship could take several forms that might benefit F&CS; a few asked F&CS's to clarify its commitment to collaborate.
- Some asked how collaboration focusing on shared space and back office functions would save money, while others observed that collaboration on programmatic concerns would be more important and possibly more cost effective.
- A number sought to understand the compelling and comprehensive vision of how all this might work together, a vision that would address these troubling economic times and the fiscal retrenchment many service agencies and funders are expressing.
- Some expressed that F&CS should not dilute their mission and focus, unless the community has a strong need for collaborative work.

A third development alternative was suggested: depending upon financing or the collaboration of a professional developer, F&CS could consider building a larger structure, or perhaps an initial portion of a larger structure on the site. The extra space in this structure could be available for a multi-agency facility in the future, while initially being available for rent to non-profit and for-profit tenants; this option could serve as an incubator for businesses or organizations, thus allowing F&CS to begin intentionally and slowly over time, to build the day-to-day collaborative and potential programmatic relationships with other agencies that would flourish in a multi-agency facility. In this model the availability of inexpensive space, the informal interactions resulting from sharing space, and collaborative opportunities facilitated by such a facility, it was felt, could yield a compelling vision for a robust, efficient and effective multi-agency facility.

Overall, participants were complimentary of the Roundtable format, the role of the Community Foundation as a neutral convener of community discussions, and the work of F&CS as a leader in providing community services.