

Forum discusses area philanthropy

By Scott Stafford, Berkshire Eagle Staff

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STOCKBRIDGE — Local civic, cultural and business leaders have struck a dialogue on better ways to give money and practice "corporate social responsibility."

At the Norman Rockwell Museum recently, about 50 people engaged in the philanthropy business in one way or another acknowledged that as a good corporate citizen, it is a company's obligation to donate a certain percentage of revenues and manpower back to the community in which it does business. Much of the discussion revolved around strategies for more effective philanthropy and how to say "no" in the face of overwhelming numbers of funding requests, while still enhancing those relationships.

Also considered was the importance of striking a balance between contributing to social needs and those of the arts and culture.

The forum was sponsored by the Massachusetts Business Roundtable and The Philanthropic Initiative.

Peter Karoff, chairman and founder of The Philanthropic Initiative and moderator of the discussion, said similar forums has been conducted in the eastern regions, but business leaders in western areas thought it might be useful to bring the conversation here.

Jennifer Dowley, president of the Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation, said it is a very difficult process corporate leadership goes through in deciding how much to give and to whom it should go.

With a finite amount of money to give away, leadership has to separate itself from the personalities involved and consider community needs and strategically decide where the money will make the most difference, at the same time defining the values that drive these decisions.

"It is a very interesting, intense internal conversation you have to have — deciding between the kids, the arts, and health is very difficult," Dowley said.

The giving that comes from a company, said Karoff, "is fundamentally a reflection of philosophies and passions of the giver."

"We cannot forget about the health and social services," said Michael Conforti, director of the Clark Art Institute. "And there may be a strategic advantage in linking these with culture, particularly in this region as it relates to economic growth — the quality of life here will be enhanced and help to attract the best employees."

The balance between social service agencies and the arts is made even more difficult because of the shrinking government aid dollars being directed to social needs, noted Thomas B. Kennedy, senior vice president of community development for Sovereign Bank. The result is that more social agencies are seeking more dollars from a finite number of sources.

"When the government drops the ball, they come to us," the philanthropic foundations, Kennedy said.

Several speakers noted that no matter how many millions are devoted to charitable causes, it will never be enough — there will always be an "overwhelming" number of requests.

It is important to measure the passion, integrity and competence of the group's leadership, as they will prove to be the most effective community investment, Kennedy said.

"When you give \$2,500 or \$5,000 to those who are very passionate about what they're doing, it will go further," said Kennedy. "And articulation of leadership is absolutely critical on both sides of the equation."

Dowley noted that the philanthropic entity should make a clear strategy for their contributions, and make it known what that plan is.

"For those who suffer from being overwhelmed, be direct and clear," she said. "Make a decision and be public about it so the nonprofits don't waste their time and yours."