

Community Foundations Are Helping an “Extraordinarily Red” Florida County Go Green

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A sunny afternoon in Sarasota, FL. Noah Densmore/shutterstock

Florida’s Sarasota County seems, at first glance, like unlikely ground for lessons on climate change philanthropy.

Republicans outnumber Democrats in the county by nearly 40% and dominate the county’s board of commissioners. A Democratic presidential candidate has not won in the county since Franklin Delano Roosevelt. And it sits in a state where the former governor reportedly prohibited use of the term “climate change” in state agencies, even as rising sea levels made flooding commonplace.

And yet, a sustainability initiative backed by a pair of the region’s community foundations, in collaboration with a long list of community partners and other funders, offers some possible pathways for local funders to advance green initiatives and win community buy-in amid unfavorable political conditions.

Known as Partners for Green Places, the effort is informed by past philanthropic successes on environmental issues in the region, and follows a two-pronged strategy of energy efficiency upgrades and solar installations at more than a dozen local nonprofits. Its leaders have big aspirations, hoping the initial round of projects will inspire broader action in the region.

In addition to Gulf Coast Community Foundation and the Community Foundation of Sarasota County, the initiative brings together a coalition of public and private partners, including Sarasota city and county governments, the agricultural extension of the University of Florida, and local nonprofit consulting business DreamLarge. The effort is also backed by two private foundations, the Charles and Margery Barancik Foundation, which has frequently partnered with the Gulf Coast Community Foundation, and the William G. and Marie Selby Foundation.

“Our whole goal is not, so to speak, working within the Gulf Coast, but working within the community so it becomes a community movement,” said Jon Thaxton, senior vice president for community investment at Gulf Coast Community Foundation.

With the impacts of climate change virtually undeniable in Florida—even the state’s new Republican governor has taken some measures to address impacts—the initiative offers a guide for similar communities, where political leadership has looked the other way as the costs of changing weather mount, to take their first steps.

“It can start with lightbulbs”

The idea for the program came from staff at the City of Sarasota and Sarasota County. They convinced Gulf Coast Community Foundation and Barancik to support a pilot of the initial phase—a water and energy efficiency program for nonprofits.

Each funder put in \$75,000, with another \$150,000 coming from a grant from Partners for Places, a national program run by the Funders Network and the Urban Sustainability Directors Network. Additional funding, including \$50,000 from the Community Foundation of Sarasota County, brought the program’s budget to \$375,000. Nonprofits are expected to provide 30% to 50% of the implementation costs.

The program began with three pilot sites in late 2019. Following an energy audit, each received \$25,000 for efficiency projects. One of those, Harvest House, a social services agency, reported that the upgrades—including programmable Wi-Fi thermostats and HVAC improvements—reduced the organization’s utility bills by \$600 a month. Later that year, 13 nonprofits were selected for energy audits; 10 of them received grants for projects in April 2020. The aim was to demonstrate to the organizations—and the community—that small changes can make a big difference.

“You don’t need to deploy solar, you don't have to make a huge capital investment. It can start with lightbulbs,” said Anand Pallegar, a board member of the Gulf Coast Community Foundation and the founder of Sarasota-based DreamLarge, which has provided marketing support to the initiative. “We showcased these three pilot organizations in a way that allowed them to storytell their experience. Now, it’s becoming a conversation piece.”

Such savings cut across ideological lines. And their appeal could reach well beyond the region’s nonprofits—if the funding is there. A United Way report found that nearly 40% of the county’s population comprise what’s typically referred to as “working poor” or, as termed by the the report,

“asset-limited, income-constrained, employed.” “We have a large portion of our population where a \$25-a-month savings is a really big deal,” Thaxton said.

Harnessing the power of the Sunshine State

As the program got off the ground, an anonymous donor stepped in with a \$200,000 donation to fund a parallel loan program for on-site solar power at local nonprofits. Barancik and Gulf Coast later matched the amount. The money will first capitalize low-interest loans to nonprofits and then, as they are paid back, the funds are slated to support education projects. Unlike the energy efficiency program, no match was required, which was key to getting buy-in amid the challenges of the pandemic.

“If we had come to the table to tell the nonprofits, ‘Here’s a loan, but now you have to raise a bunch of grant money,’ with everything going on, they probably wouldn’t have been able to participate. It just would have been too much for them,” said Andy Tugendhat, who is the project manager of the program and was named volunteer of the month by the University of Florida’s Sarasota County extension for his role in the initiative.

It’s not the first time the partners have invested in harnessing the Sunshine State’s namesake energy source. In late 2019, Barancik funded the largest solar energy system in the county at a local service provider, Girls Inc.

The solar program, like the energy efficiency program, is relatively modest in size. But Tugendhat sees both more as pilots. His hope is the early projects will lead more community members to step up. He’d like to see a future batch of projects involving impact investments. For instance, foundations or social impact funds might provide loans to nonprofits for renewable energy projects.

“Solar is a very capital-intensive thing,” Tugendhat said. “Once we have some successful projects, my goal is to really promote this pilot and try to bring other people to the table.”

“You build a story around the individual”

While climate change motivates the program’s organizers—“it drives everything I do,” Tugendhat told me—it is scarcely mentioned in the program’s website or communications. That’s intentional. For the energy efficiency program, the primary message is about saving money—the leading concern for the nonprofits in the program. Most are human services organizations, so addressing climate change is not central to their missions.

“We’re not avoiding the term ‘climate change,’ but we’re using climate change in a context that is useful,” Thaxton said. “You build a story around the individual and then the nomenclature becomes much less significant.”

Thaxton describes Sarasota County as “extraordinarily red.” But he said he’s found there is regional support for sustainability initiatives—when the framing is right. He has worked on three environmental land acquisition campaigns for the region. Each has successfully won voter approval. “You have to have the vast majority of Republicans voting to approve these self-taxing initiatives,” he said.

Like the current effort, the emphasis in those campaigns was on creating a narrative for the public, not a message focused on climate change. “We didn’t shy away from those terms, but that’s not where our emphasis was. The story was that you will now have a beautiful trail to take your grandchildren to.”

Community foundations were “the guiding light and the North Star”

The community foundations involved in Partners for Green Places are but two in a constellation of participants, including other funders. While the financial capital they bring is perhaps the most significant contribution—“otherwise we couldn’t do it, period,” Tugendhat said—their social capital is also vital. “It’s important when they put their name behind something in our community, because they carry a fair amount of weight,” Tugendhat said.

Community foundations are famous for their capacity to mobilize and convene key players. This project was no exception. Gulf Coast Community Foundation and the Community Foundation of Sarasota County involvement helped identify this issue and bring together key stakeholders to move the project forward, said Pallegar. And once everyone was on board, they provided what philanthropy likes to call the “risk capital” to take the first steps.

“They were sort of the guiding light and the North Star that helped us navigate the entirety of the program, more so than the city and county were able to do,” said Julia Groom, a director at DreamLarge. “They did the hard work, the real work, in order for this program to be a success.”

Gulf Coast Community Foundation has led several environmental efforts in the region, most recently helping to publish a [water quality playbook](#) to inform action in the region. Their choice to back projects like Partners for Green Places, as with all their work, seeks to leverage their unique role, regardless of potential controversy.

“One of the challenges that our board gives us is to ask ourselves, ‘If not for Gulf Coast, than who?’” Thaxton said. “If the private sector’s not there, if the government’s not going to do it, if the public is having difficulty with it, that’s where we can step up.”