

New plan, more goals for Kiewit Foundation

By Steve Jordon / World-Herald staff writer | Posted: Sunday, November 30, 2014 1:00 am

The 35-year-old Peter Kiewit Foundation is reinventing itself to initiate improvements in Nebraska, western Iowa and the Omaha area, alongside its traditional role of funding grant proposals that land on its doorstep.

A year and a half after hiring a new executive director, the Omaha nonprofit group's board of directors has adopted a new strategic plan that pledges to go especially deep into programs that:

- » Increase the number of young people who succeed in education and get “meaningful employment.”
- » Bolster the region’s “vital, diverse and growing economy that advances individual and community prosperity.”
- » “Support local efforts to build thriving communities.”

The Kiewit Foundation has contributed to the region’s growth for decades and was the first large local grant-maker that focused on improvements that have a broad impact on people. It has served as an example for other foundations set up by other wealthy individuals, including family foundations set up by Omaha businessman Warren Buffett and many of his early shareholders.

The Kiewit Foundation’s new strategic plan follows a yearlong study that included a survey of groups that received its grants and direct feed back from more than 500 people who are “stakeholders” in the region targeted by Peter Kiewit. The industrialist used most of his wealth, about \$150 million, to create the foundation in 1979.

The foundation will seek a balance between the foundation’s traditional grant application process and active searches for projects to support that are aligned with Kiewit’s values and interests, said Jeffrey Kutash, executive director since February 2013.

The plan also calls for the foundation and its staff to use their research capability, relationships, expertise and “power to convene” groups that have common interests so they can work together as partners with the foundation’s support.

“We want to bring all of who we are to bear, to make the biggest contributions we can,” Kutash said.



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The plan also says that the foundation's activities will continue to evolve and that it will consider worthy projects outside its main areas of emphasis.

Monday, Wendy Boyer will move to the foundation from her job as senior vice president for community investment and advocacy at the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce. She will lead the foundation's effort to improve the region's education, workforce and economic development.

Boyer will focus on the "education to employment pipeline," Kutash said, seeking ways to fill in gaps between school and "family sustaining careers" so that more people can contribute to their communities' well-being as adults.

"She brings a huge amount of experience and credibility and knowledge and talent and relationships," Kutash said, and the Omaha chamber will remain a key partner in the effort, along with the region's schools and employers.

Boyer was an Omaha Public Schools elementary school teacher and assistant principal at Marrs Middle School before joining the chamber 10 years ago.

"My passion has always been around education and workforce development, to improve the quality of life for individuals throughout our community that may not have had all the opportunities that others have had," Boyer said. "This is a great opportunity to take what I've learned at the chamber into this new role."

The chamber has acted as a catalyst for improving the community, bringing people together to create coalitions, she said, and the Kiewit Foundation can, too.

The foundation's strategic plan is based on its mission statement: "To create opportunities for people to live in and help build strong, vibrant communities, achieve economic success and enjoy a high quality of life."

The plan refers to the education system as P-16 — from preschool to four-year college graduation, which Kutash said includes two-year colleges, vocational training, skill certifications and other forms of postsecondary training and education.

He said the foundation's staff has met with education officials and employers to gain a "cradle-to-career" perspective. The foundation hopes to help strengthen connections between the key groups that have a hand in ensuring young people's success — teachers, parents, coaches, human resources directors and others — so they can work together to "help a young person turn into a successful adult."

"The issues are complex," Kutash said. "I say they're like a river. They don't know the boundaries that exist between different sectors."

Problems must be addressed if the communities are to improve, he said. The foundation's strategic

plan says that while some of its efforts will be statewide, its priorities include “communities that face disproportionate needs.”

As before, the foundation won’t raise money from other sources, he said, but will continue relying on its own \$400 million endowment. The foundation has provided more than \$580 million for grants and scholarships over the years.

Kutash said the foundation also will continue its tradition of “challenge” grants, which call on grantees to find donations to match grants. Kiewit himself favored the technique as a way to assure strong community support and accomplish more than the foundation could on its own.

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