

Friday, Nov. 11, 2005

Community foundation blazes trail for other states to follow

By **JERRY GUENTHER**

jguenther@norfolkdailynews.com

The next time Gov. Dave Heineman needs help promoting Nebraska, he might want to consider four speakers from other states who heaped praise on the state Thursday in Norfolk.

The representatives of major philanthropic organizations addressed about 75 Nebraskans during one of the Nebraska Community Foundation's working sessions Thursday afternoon at Divots Conference Center.

"You (Nebraskans) renew my spirit when I come here. That and the beef," said Rick Foster of the Kellogg Foundation in Battle Creek, Mich.

Foster, who is the vice president for Kellogg's Food Systems & Rural Development, said Nebraskans' support for the Nebraska Community Foundation is impressive and is "setting a new bar for other states to follow."

Began in 1993, the Nebraska Community Foundation encourages people across the state to donate or leave assets to a tax-deductible fund set up within local communities across the state.

Part of the idea behind the foundation is to set up endowments to keep libraries, hospitals and swimming pools open and to address other quality-of-life issues.

Beyond that, funds are used to help provide economic incentives to help stabilize populations in rural areas.

Thursday's annual meeting in Norfolk included working sessions, displays and an awards banquet with more than 200 people from all areas of the state attending.

Foster and other members of a panel who spoke said the Nebraska Community Foundation serves as a model for other states, especially those trying to enhance rural economic development.

Foster said Nebraskans have a loyalty to each other and to their rural way of life that isn't found in many other places.

"These are values that are non-negotiable," Foster said.

The Kellogg Foundation has been a major contributor to the Nebraska Community Foundation, including a \$2 million grant over three years awarded last April to the HomeTown Competitiveness model that seeks to keep more young people in small towns.

Foster called rural America a tremendous asset to the rest of the nation that is being rediscovered. Rural America benefits the rest of the nation, and “we want to support it,” he said.

Suzanne Siskel, a representative of the Ford Foundation in New York, said she knows Nebraskans have been emphasizing the need to keep its young people in the state.

Siskel said it is OK if Nebraska loses a few young people each year “because they take those Nebraska values with them” and help enrich the rest of the world.

Linetta Gilbert, another representative of the Ford Foundation in New York, said the Nebraska Community Foundation has “cut a new mold” that other rural areas are trying to duplicate.

Nebraskans not only support funds that have been set up, but they volunteer their time and talents to help each other, Gilbert said.

The residents understand that volunteering time and talent “serves as the glue” to make a community or region stick together, she said.

Sometimes it might seem as if the United States has lost the spirit of innovation, Gilbert said. But then when she returns to a place like Nebraska, she sees innovation not only within communities, but within the spirit of philanthropy, she said.

Among the stories shared Thursday was a farmer in Diller in southeast Nebraska who gave 48 heifers to the Diller Community Foundation. The value was a little more than \$50,000, which has been matched by other donors in the community and is serving as the cornerstone of a \$200,000 goal for the local foundation.

Janet Topolsky of the Aspen Institute in Washington, D.C., said she speaks around the nation and always uses Nebraska as a positive example in her stories.

The Aspen Institute helps lead programs in rural development and philanthropy giving.

Topolsky said in the eyes of many metropolitan areas, places like rural Nebraska are viewed as “asset poor” with lots of people moving to metro areas.

What the metropolitan areas don’t understand is that these places actually are rich in assets that include land, survival, risk taking, natural resources, humor, manners and humility, Topolsky said.

“You are my best stories,” she said.