

A conversation with Greater Greater Washington, June 7, 2016

Participants

- David Alpert – Founder and Board President, Greater Greater Washington (GGWash)
- Sarah Guidi – Managing Director, GGWash
- David Whitehead – Housing Program Organizer, GGWash
- Alexander Berger – Program Officer, U.S. Policy, Open Philanthropy Project

Note: These notes were compiled by the Open Philanthropy Project and give an overview of the major points made by Mr. Alpert, Ms. Guidi, and Mr. Whitehead.

Summary

The Open Philanthropy Project spoke with Mr. Alpert, Ms. Guidi, and Mr. Whitehead of GGWash to get an update on our 2015 grant. Conversation topics included GGWash's recent organizing and advocacy activities, fundraising, and additions to its board of directors.

Updates on grant goals and other recent activities

GGWash had three major goals towards which it planned to direct our 2015 grant:

1. Organizing commissioners of Advisory Neighborhood Commissions (ANCs) who support GGWash's mission.
2. Preparing GGWash for online organizing.
3. Work around DC's Comprehensive Plan.

Updates on each of these goals follow.

Organizing ANC commissioners

GGWash recently held a kickoff event for its work networking with and organizing ANC commissioners, who are influential in development decisions and neighborhood planning. The commissioners in attendance showed interest in building a network to collaborate and strategize on projects where coordinated action would be beneficial (such as advocacy around DC's Comprehensive Plan). This group plans to meet again in August.

GGWash aims to have an operating list of roughly 40 commissioners from across DC's eight wards by the end of the year. Ideally, GGWash hopes to have at least two commissioners from each ward to maintain a diversity of voices.

Online organizing

GGWash expects its online customer relationship management system to be finalized in the next couple of weeks. The software enables GGWash to issue action alerts, gather signatures for petitions, and to build its email list. GGWash also plans to use this system to gain a better understanding of its supporters, particularly by

identifying those who are likely interested in and able to support GGWash in ways beyond engagement with the blog.

GGWash is developing its strategy for how and when to use its online organizing tools. For example, GGWash is trying out online organizing for a site-specific case of a school district site in the upper Northwest quadrant that has been losing housing units over last year due to opposition from NIMBY groups. GGWash has done some organizing and strategizing with community groups that are focused on the issue.

GGWash is also doing advocacy around a stalled housing bill that it believes has the potential to improve the accounting of a substantial roster of vacant houses and lots, and ultimately get them approved and developed for use. GGWash is writing blog posts about the issue and is creating a petition to attempt to advance the bill. GGWash became aware of this bill through its community and has met with some of the bill's authors.

GGWash is actively looking for other opportunities to use its online organizing capacity.

DC's Comprehensive Plan

The city's expected timeline for final approval of the Comprehensive Plan is a couple of years. This timeline fits well with GGWash's work, because David Whitehead has had time to learn about the issues and build relationships before momentum on the Comprehensive Plan picks up.

Court ruling

A recent court ruling overturning a zoning board approval of a project with new housing was based on language in the Comprehensive Plan. This ruling has drawn attention to the need to revise and clarify the Comprehensive Plan's language and has made the Comprehensive Plan a more salient issue to organize around.

Organizing of interest groups to propose amendments

GGWash would like to convene various interest groups, including affordable housing groups, social justice groups, business interests, and developers, to produce a series of proposed amendments to the Comprehensive Plan. To GGWash's knowledge, a large collaborative effort of this kind around the Comprehensive Plan has not happened before in Washington.

Reading group

GGWash is hosting a six-month, online reading group to discuss the Comprehensive Plan chapter by chapter, with different moderators each week. Over 65 people have signed up so far. The goal of the group is to educate members of the GGWash community about the plan and to create momentum on the issue, which ideally will lead to further strengthening and expansion of the GGWash community. The reading group will also provide an opportunity to involve other affordable housing and organizing groups.

Recent staff activities

Recently, Mr. Alpert has had more time to build relationships with regional leaders, in part due to Jonathan Neeley becoming a full-time Staff Editor. Ms. Guidi has been focused on improving GGWash's organization, creating clear descriptions for volunteer roles, designing a financial plan, and developing relationships with foundations. Mr. Whitehead has been building relationships with other groups focused on housing issues.

Media presence

GGWash believes that coverage of housing issues in the national media has improved, and that local groups like GGWash have benefited somewhat from national coverage of, e.g., research by Raj Chetty (Stanford University).

GGWash believes it would be beneficial for the media to more clearly present the connection between affordable housing and housing supply. GGWash's impression is that the potentially significant impact of, e.g., DC's Comprehensive Plan on affordable housing goals is not widely recognized.

Fundraising

GGWash's fundraising is going fairly well overall.

Foundations

So far, GGWash has secured about half of its goal for fundraising from foundations for the year. Because the field of local foundations interested in GGWash's issues is fairly limited and already fairly crowded with potential grantees, GGWash is in competition for a limited pool of funding. GGWash is currently working to develop relationships with foundations and has submitted a number of letters of intent and preliminary applications.

Following an editorial by GGWash contributor Dan Malouff about Sonja Trauss (SF Bay Area Renters' Federation) in January, a local family foundation offered GGWash a grant. GGWash believes this foundation is a good fit as a funding partner and hopes to build a long-term relationship.

Corporate sponsorship

GGWash has secured between a quarter and a third of its corporate fundraising target for the year. GGWash has found securing corporate sponsorships somewhat more difficult than anticipated.

Other fundraising

GGWash has reached its targets for fundraising from readers and board members for the year, and has significantly surpassed its very conservative earned-income target (mainly due to a partnership on a campaign with the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority). GGWash has some budget cushion available for this year due to earned revenue exceeding targets and taking longer to hire for

the Housing Program Organizer role than they had anticipated.

Additions to the GGWash board of directors

GGWash has added three board members since the beginning of Open Philanthropy's grant term:

- Gerry Widdicombe, Director of Economic Development, Downtown DC Business Improvement District.
- Miti Figueredo, Vice President of Planning and Entitlement, Chevy Chase Land Company.
- Dan Tangherlini, former Administrator of the US General Services Administration and a former executive at the Department of the Treasury.

GGWash hopes to add one or two more board members by the end of the year.

All Open Philanthropy Project conversations are available at <http://www.openphilanthropy.org/research/conversations>