



Balancing Purpose and Longevity: Financial Strategies for Community Impact

Summary

This session brought together leaders from both community and private philanthropy to explore how financial strategies—particularly the balance between endowments and spend-down funds—can be intentionally used to align with donor priorities and community needs. The conversation included insights from Kjeld Mizpah (KJ) Conyers-Steede (Future Civics), Mike Williams (The Waltons Trust), Nancy Dossous (Community Foundations of Canada), and Tracey Vavrek (Community Foundations of Canada).

The session opened with a grounding discussion on purpose: Why do foundations exist, and how should this guide their financial decisions? **KJ Conyers-Steede** framed the conversation by encouraging a shift from “preservation” to “participation”—suggesting that financial capital must be deployed in ways that invite community ownership and support systems change, especially in rural and equity-deserving areas.

Mike Williams shared the Waltons Trust’s experience with spend-down philanthropy. The Trust is intentionally structured to sunset within a defined period, allowing it to deploy funds with urgency and boldness. Mike emphasized that legacy isn’t just about longevity—it’s about impact. By having a clear exit timeline, the Trust can make decisions rooted in transformation rather than incrementalism.

Tracey Vavrek highlighted the enduring role of endowments in community foundations. She explained that endowments provide a stable, long-term financial base for future generations and offer donors the assurance of sustainability. However, she also noted that endowments should not come at the cost of flexibility. Foundations must evolve with the times and be able to respond to immediate community needs—something that spend-down or hybrid funds make possible.

Nancy Dossous shared perspectives on how CFC is supporting local foundations in exploring diverse funding models. She stressed the importance of co-creation and community-informed decision-making. Community foundations, she said, are being called to reimagine how capital flows—not just for operational sustainability but for community transformation.

Throughout the session, speakers discussed how foundations can be more courageous in their financial strategies—releasing capital more readily and intentionally, and building relationships with donors that go beyond transactional giving. Donor education, storytelling, and trust-building were emphasized as essential tools for aligning financial vehicles with a foundation’s purpose.



The panel agreed that there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Foundations must consider their unique context, history, and goals when choosing between or blending endowment and spend-down approaches. What matters most is clarity of purpose, transparency with donors, and responsiveness to community realities.

The session ended with a call to action: **let values—not habit—guide your financial structures.**

Key Takeaway Actions

1. **Re-examine Your Foundation’s “Why”:** Clarify your purpose. Whether focused on long-term sustainability or immediate impact, your financial strategy should be in service of that mission.
2. **Educate and Engage Donors:** Help donors understand the difference between endowments and spend-down models. Use stories and data to demonstrate the value of each—and why a blended approach might best serve their intentions.
3. **Build Hybrid Models for Flexibility:** Consider offering a mix of endowment and spend-down funds to meet both current and future needs. Hybrid strategies provide adaptability while preserving a foundation’s long-term viability.
4. **Be Courageous with Capital:** Don’t let fear of depletion stall progress. Strategic spend-down funds can address urgent issues while building trust and demonstrating impact.
5. **Let Community Lead:** Involve community members in financial planning processes. When communities shape how capital flows, impact becomes more inclusive and lasting.
6. **Document and Share Learning:** Be transparent about what’s working and what isn’t. Sharing case studies can inspire and inform others navigating similar questions.

Reflective Questions

1. What is the core purpose our foundation’s financial model is meant to serve?
2. Are our donors clear on how their funds are used—and aligned with community needs?
3. How can we incorporate community voice into financial planning and fund design?
4. What risks are we willing to take in order to meet urgent needs?