

# Cities in Transition - Interview

*Vacant Property Research Initiative*



**Don Chen**  
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## Profile

As senior program officer for the Ford Foundation's Metropolitan Program, Don Chen supports the work of national and local organizations to revitalize cities in transition. As the executive director of Smart Growth America, Chen was a co-founder of the National Vacant Properties Campaign. Chen shared his observations on the expanding role foundations are playing in addressing the socio-economic problems of cities in transition, as well as rebuilding the capacity of their local governments.

## Philanthropy to Rebuild Cities in Transition

By Joe Schilling, PhD

Many American philanthropic institutions—such as the Ford, Carnegie, and Rockefeller foundations—trace their roots back to fortunes made in American industry. It is no coincidence, then, that these foundations sponsor longstanding programs to address the quality of life in the cities built by the transportation and manufacturing industries during the 19th and early 20th century.

By the 1950s, according to Don Chen, the Ford Foundation had made the first steps toward helping to solidify the emerging community development movement. Community development remains central to Ford's work today: "The issues of cities in transition also closely align with the Ford Foundation's mission to reduce poverty and promote social justice," says Chen. "Today our Metropolitan Program supports nonprofits, business leaders, and government officials working on urban problems such as vacant properties, neighborhood stabilization and the essential building blocks of urban life—safe and accessible housing, quality education, and vibrant arts and culture." Cities in transition offer the Ford Foundation and other philanthropic institutions opportunities to devise solutions to some of the more complex urban challenges facing America, says Chen.

## Boosting Local Government Capacity

When Ford Foundation President Luis Ubiñas came on board in 2008, he challenged the Metropolitan Program team to devise new strategies for current urban challenges and emerging trends. One of the new areas for the foundation's work in cities in transition is assisting local governments to rebuild their capacity in the face of severe revenue and staffing shortages. "Many cities have trouble implementing programs and sometimes even fail to spend all of the grant dollars they have," points out Chen. Ford and other major foundations are now looking at ways to build the capacity of cities in transition.

"Foundations certainly do not want to replace the function of local government. That could be a slippery slope," says Chen. "However, foundation support can supplement existing capacity through trainings, boot camps, and the delivery of outside expertise, such as SWOT teams, consultants, and support fellowships that bring in talented people." Chen cites the example of New Orleans, where the Curex Fellowship program brought in young professionals to help rebuild the city's organizational infrastructure. Now the federal government will deploy fellows through the Strong Cities, Strong Communities funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. The Ford Foundation currently supports the Detroit Revitalization Fellows, through Wayne State University.

### Acting on Behalf of Cities in Distress

Chen has become a vocal advocate to encourage other foundations to pay especially close attention to the long-term implications of local government fiscal distress: “We see more and more local governments on the verge of bankruptcy. Several state commissions are revisiting the legal requirements for taking over local governments. Even if the local governments stay solvent, they are providing fewer and fewer municipal services. Such an insidious cycle of fiscal distress affects so many lives in a negative way through continual cuts in services and infrastructure. The real costs may not surface right away, but will begin to manifest in many different ways.” For example, Chen points to deferred maintenance on public infrastructure such as roads, schools, sewers, and housing, which in turn becomes a barrier to job growth and economic prosperity.

“Unfortunately, it seems conditions will get worse before they get better,” predicts Chen. “Thus, foundations are now looking at infrastructure financing policy and projects as a way to identify innovative programs, such as the City of Los Angeles infrastructure banking pilot American Fast Forward.” Chen believes models are needed for ways to fund transitional projects at the regional, state, or even federal levels: “Our strategy here is the same as it is for other urban problems: Support the pilot testing of promising practices, identify those that bear fruit, and then help take them to scale.”



Photo courtesy of Ian Beniston, Youngstown Neighborhood Development Corporation (YNDC)

“No matter how much we get done, foundations can never meet all community demands,” asserts Chen. “But we can make a difference in helping cities in transition rebuild their local government capacity. We are constantly learning and refining our approaches to these initiatives. In fact, rebuilding city capacity is a relatively new part of the foundation culture. As we explore these new capacity building efforts, foundation will certainly need to carefully evaluate the impacts from their grant making strategies.”