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Investment return

Value of grants more valuable with matching funds

By **Liz McMahan**
Phoenix Staff Writer



Jeremy Mendenhall, 703 Creek St., holds his 17-month-old son Jeremiah as he examines the soffit that needs replacing around his home. Mendenhall's home is one of 10 in the city's original townsite that will receive new siding and other repairs under a \$200,000 grant from the City of Muskogee Foundation. The grant money comes from interest earned when the city leased the hospital to a private company three years ago.

The City of Muskogee Foundation handed out nearly \$2.7 million in grants last week, but with matching funds, the grant projects will total more than \$4.6 million.

For example, the \$269,459 grant to the city for construction of a terminal building at Davis Field will be matched with \$550,000 — some from the Oklahoma Aeronautics Commission and the balance from the Capital Investments Project approved by voters in 2009.

A \$200,000 grant to Friends of Honor Heights Park will be matched with another \$200,000 raised by the group. That money will construct a "Birds, Butterflies and Blooms" teaching garden and butterfly sanctuary at the park. It is expected to be used by area school children and to be a tourist attraction.

"The board has tried to value those grants that are leveraged," said Frank Merrick, the Foundation's executive director. "I feel that as the Muskogee Nonprofit Resource Center gets better at what they do — and they're improving all the time — they're going to help people find other monies. So I think you're going to see this leverage continuing."

The City of Muskogee Foundation was formed to oversee the investment and expenditure of the funds the city received from leasing Muskogee Regional Medical Center in 2007.

A large portion of that money has now been paid to the Foundation and invested in a diversified portfolio. Today, the Foundation has more than \$103 million in investments and other assets.

In addition, the group has handed out several million in grants to local schools, the city and various groups and organizations.

The first grant awarded was to the city — \$1.5 million for the purchase of land for an industrial park.

In addition to the grants, the Foundation has loaned the city \$1.2 million at 2 percent interest to

construct Phase 3 of Port Place Road. The loan will be repaid from the Capital Investment sales tax collections, but that money will be available after revenues have accumulated. Port and city officials wanted to make the road improvements now instead of waiting.

Merrick said he looks forward to the Foundation's board retreat in August, that with two years of experience, the board needs to look at its opportunities and sharpen its focus.

That focus could be in tourism, economic development or health and wellness by way of parks and recreation, he said. The group already has already made a commitment to economic development and education.

Merrick, who lives in the Oklahoma City area, oversees several foundations through his Communities Foundation of Oklahoma.

"I think the more focused your foundations are, the more impact they can have," he said. "I've got one that concentrates on nursing scholarships and they have made a difference in the state of Oklahoma because of their efforts."

That foundation, in Oklahoma City, funds nursing scholarships statewide. Their students accounted for 10 percent of the masters of nursing degrees awarded in Oklahoma last year, he said.

"I think if the City of Muskogee Foundation could focus ... I think we're on the cusp of doing some really good stuff," he said.

The focus the Foundation takes is up to its board of directors, he said.

Reach Liz McMahan at 684-2926 or lmcmahan@muskogee phoenix.com.