
- Local

Christmas came early for Fresno's largest philanthropic organization.

The Fresno Regional Foundation has received a \$3 million grant – the largest in the foundation's history – to support nonprofits working to meet some of the greatest economic, environmental and social needs of the San Joaquin Valley.

The grant, from the San Francisco-based James Irvine Foundation, is a bold philanthropic gesture for the Valley, which lags behind most other areas of the state in nonprofit giving.

For cash-strapped organizations, the timing couldn't be better – unemployment is high, donations are hard to come by and grants are competitive. The money could give many organizations the boost they need to do some big-impact, long-lasting projects.

The Fresno Regional Foundation, a community organization that gives grants and donations to local nonprofits, plans to announce the grant during its 45th anniversary celebration today.

The money will be distributed over the next three years in smaller grants of about \$100,000 to \$300,000, Fresno Regional Foundation Chief Executive Dan DeSantis said.

«That's huge for a community of our size,» DeSantis said. Grants from the Fresno foundation usually are less than \$50,000.

Even for a powerhouse grant-making organization like the Irvine Foundation, which gives out about \$65 million a year, \$3 million isn't exactly pocket change.

«Grants of this size are rare for us,» said Jim Canales, the James Irvine Foundation's chief executive.

Only one community foundation in the state has received a larger grant – the Orange County Community Foundation got \$3.5 million in 2007.

The Fresno Regional Foundation will create an advisory board comprised of 11 community leaders to decide how the money should be spent. Nonprofit organizations working in areas of critical need will be able to apply for grants in early 2012.

The foundation hopes the gift will stimulate a new and robust era of philanthropy in the Valley.

The Fresno foundation will use the Irvine money to establish a new fund, called Fund for the San Joaquin Valley.

DeSantis hopes community donors will contribute to that fund, creating an endowment that could eventually provide up to \$1 million per year to support nonprofits working in the Valley.

Canales said it was too soon to know if the Irvine Foundation would renew the grant in 2014 – but it's a possibility, he said, adding that «the Irvine Foundation is deeply committed to the San Joaquin Valley for the long term.»

The Irvine Foundation's ties with the Fresno Regional Foundation date to 2004, and in many ways, it has helped the Fresno foundation become the organization it is today.

From 2004 to 2008, the Irvine Foundation gave the community foundation almost \$1.2 million to hire

- Local

and train staff, build relationships in the community and improve its money management.

Today, the Fresno Regional Foundation is as financially strong as it's ever been. In 2003, it had about \$15 million in assets, according to tax documents. In 2009, according to the most recent tax return available, the foundation's assets were almost \$47 million. Today, DeSantis estimates it has closer to \$50 million.

Local organizations say the Fresno Regional Foundation has become a mainstay for efforts ranging from preserving the San Joaquin River to mentoring foster children. The Fresno Regional Foundation gives most of its grants – about \$7 million a year, according to 2009 tax documents – for health care, education, arts and the environment.

Focus Forward, a Fresno County organization that provides education programs to incarcerated youths, has received \$103,000 in grants since 2006. Last week, the organization received its largest grant yet – \$39,000 – from the Fresno Regional Foundation to teach teen pregnancy prevention and reproductive health classes at the juvenile detention facility starting next month.

The Fresno Regional Foundation gave Sisterhood of Survivors, a group that supports breast-cancer patients, a \$4,000 grant in 2008. The money helped the small organization visit newly diagnosed patients and deliver educational materials.

«It's really, really important to a woman to feel that she's not alone,» said Sisterhood of Survivors board member Terry Elrod.

Like many foundations, Fresno Regional has given the occasional bad grant or ill-timed donation. In 2009, a Fresno County group that advocates for abused foster children, CASA, returned about half of a \$23,000 grant it received that was to be used to

set up a tutoring program. The program never got off the ground, said Nathan Lee, CASA's executive director.

«It never blossomed,» Lee said. «It was just bad timing.»

The reporter can be reached at hsomerville@fresnobee.com or (559) 441-6412.