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New Erb foundation to give away millions

Wide scope of initiatives can get grants

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The Oakland County family whose lumber company grew to have 45 Midwest locations has endowed a new foundation that plans to give away \$2.7 million by June and \$5 million in 2010, most of it in Michigan.

Annual grants from the Erb Family Foundation should rise to \$10 million in five to 10 years, when Fred and Barbara Erb "finish their giving" of more than \$200 million the couple earmarked for the charity, said their son John Erb, president of the Birmingham-based foundation.

Two weeks ago, the foundation launched a Web site, www.erbfamilyfoundation.org, and began soliciting grant applications.

The foundation's endowment began with \$100 million last year but is expected to rise to between \$200 million and \$250 million, John Erb said. That would make it about the 18th largest family foundation in Michigan, according to 2008 rankings by the Detroit-based Council of Michigan Foundations, an association of about 400 foundations.

In December, the foundation gave \$500,000, matched by another \$500,000 from the senior Erbs. It was split among the Salvation Army, The Heat and Warmth Fund and the food rescue agency Forgotten Harvest.

The foundation plans to support a diverse scope of philanthropy -- projects to improve water quality in the Great Lakes and to promote environmental health, community and youth arts, like jazz music in metro Detroit, and research on preventing and treating Alzheimer's disease.

Environmental causes head the list, said Jodee Raines, vice president of programs.

Barbara and Fred Erb already are known for their environmental fervor. In 1996, they started the Erb Institute for Global Sustainable Enterprise at the University of Michigan with gifts that have totaled \$20 million, according to U-M's Web site.

Fred Erb, 85, bought into his uncle's lumber and coal business in Royal Oak in 1947, when it had seven employees, his son said. By the 1970s, Erb Lumber had become the largest supplier of lumber in Michigan, and when the company was sold in 1993 it had 1,300 employees, John Erb said.

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Additional Facts

How to get an Erb foundation grant

The new Erb Family Foundation has these guidelines for how it will award grants:

- Applicants must be nonprofit 501(c)(3) organizations.
- Applicants' main activities must fit the foundation's mission, which is "to nurture environmentally healthy and culturally vibrant communities in metropolitan Detroit and support initiatives to restore the Great Lakes Basin."
- In general, grants will not support individuals, loans, religious activities, fund-raising, conferences or capital projects.

Grant applications and details are at www.erbfamilyfoundation.org.
