



# ANNUAL APPEAL CRITICAL TO SUSTAINABLE FUNDING

The Partnership for the Delaware Estuary knew how essential it was to have a broad base of funding support and, like many nonprofits, struggled to identify its funding vehicle. With the NEP management approach as the guideline, they turned lessons learned from early-on funding disappointments into a finely tuned strategy to secure and sustain funding.

When the Partnership began its annual appeal program in 1996, it faced a number of challenges. Not only was the organization new; the resource it protects—the Delaware Estuary—was nearly unknown in the three states it occupies. To build support for the Partnership, the director and staff established relationships with Delaware Estuary stakeholders and engaged them in program activities, speculating that those who were involved with its activities would be far more likely to offer financial support.

## THE NATIONAL ESTUARY PROGRAM IN ACTION

## Partnership for the Delaware Estuary

In 1999, the Partnership instituted its first appeal campaign funded by a foundation grant for capacity building. It used a mail house and sent a generic appeal letter to the 25,000 people on the organization's mailing list, all of whom were recipients of the Partnership's quarterly newsletter. The results were disappointing and the Partnership huddled to restructure the appeal.

A year later, the Partnership tested a smaller, more personal approach. It sent personalized ap-

peal letters along with an annual activity report and an appeal return envelope to past donors and to a select group from the mailing list (fewer than 1,000 people). The results improved, but the Partnership believed they could do better.

In 2001, the Partnership further targeted its annual appeal with the help of a fundraising consultant. For its 2001 appeal, the Partnership segmented the mailing list into four different target groups: past givers, lapsed and

never givers, board member contacts (with the letters signed by the board member), and board members. Each group received a different letter and program materials. The Partnership also gave a set of estuary-themed note cards (purchased wholesale from a publisher) to donors contributing over \$75. This model returned the best results and the partnership received 57 donations totaling nearly \$10,000.

Since 2001, the Partnership has continued to segment the annual



appeal mailing. Each year, prior donors are asked to consider increasing their gift. A second mailing each spring targets past givers who did not respond to the fall appeal. In all cases, donors of over \$75 receive a specially designed set of note cards.

Their annual appeal strategy—along with increased awareness of the Delaware Estuary and the Partnership—has generated a steady increase on the return from the annual appeal campaign. In 2005, the Partnership received a total of \$29,779 in donations from 183 people, for an average gift of \$163.

Their lessons learned are applicable to many other community-based programs:

- While an annual appeal is not a quick fix for raising unrestricted revenue, it can be a very successful resource that pays off over time.

- Annual appeals should be viewed as an investment in the organization's funding health: it may take several years to see a positive return, and all the while there are related expenses, such as staff time, printing, postage, and giveaways.

- The success of annual appeals depends on building a relationship with donors; the more specific and personal the appeal, the better.

- Timing is important—appeals should be on a consistent schedule, and the end of the calendar year is for many a key time as it is when givers feel beneficent and seek tax deductions.

- Recognition matters: the Partnership lists all donors to its annual appeal in an activity report.

Visit [www.delawareestuary.org](http://www.delawareestuary.org) to learn more about this and other Partnership efforts.

*EPA's National Estuary Program (NEP) is a unique and successful coastal watershed-based program established in 1987 under the Clean Water Act Amendments. The NEP involves the public and collaborates with partners to protect, restore, and maintain the water quality and ecological integrity of 28 estuaries of national significance located in 18 coastal states and Puerto Rico.*

*For more information about the NEP go to [www.epa.gov/owow/estuaries](http://www.epa.gov/owow/estuaries).*