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Extravagant efficiency

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Directors of many charities and government agencies believe big spending is justified to win support and accomplish their missions.

That was the explanation given by the former director of the Tampa Bay Workforce Alliance when asked why she wasted so much of taxpayers' money on pricey meals, including once spending \$50 for a dozen cupcakes.

We prefer the thrifty approach shared by David Fischer, CEO of the Community Foundation of Tampa Bay, and the organization's chairman, Martin Solomon. Under their leadership, the agency is again ranked among the most efficient charities in the country.

Donors to the foundation typically get directly involved in how their money is spent. They expect a maximum return and minimum overhead.

The staff and volunteer board of the foundation consistently deliver, which explains why the foundation has grown so rapidly.

The foundation's administrative costs are only 1.6 percent. Fundraising takes another 1.5 percent. That leaves nearly 97 percent for programs.

According to Charity Navigator, a group that keeps an eye on the books of charities nationwide, only five agencies in the country are more efficient than the Community Foundation of Tampa Bay.

After starting with nothing 20 years ago, the foundation now has assets of about \$131 million. Even during the weak economy, it continues to spend about \$10 million a year on a variety of charitable projects in the Tampa area.

Fischer, a former mayor of St. Petersburg, jokes that "if government agencies had to raise 25 percent of their own budgets, you would see a big cut in expenses."

Or perhaps we would be bombarded with calls from professional fundraisers who often keep a larger share of the donations they collect than they send to the agency on whose behalf they badger the public. Some fundraisers charge 80 percent or more.

Another suggestion from Fischer is more appealing. Imagine how much money the foundation will be managing 20 years from now and how much more it will be able to help this community.