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An outspoken outsider takes reins of merged foundations

CARSON BRINGS STRONG SOCIAL-ISSUES BACKGROUND

Mercury News Editorial

Board members of the newly created Silicon Valley Community Foundation were looking for a leader commensurate with its clout. They found him in Emmett Carson, who will become its first CEO and president.

Carson, chief executive of the Minneapolis Foundation for the past 12 years, is a leading figure in philanthropy. He's also outspoken and often blunt on issues of race, class and poverty, and will amplify the voice of the Silicon Valley Community Foundation as it seeks to expand its impact on the region.

Carson appears to be a logical hire and a good fit. His immediate challenge is to complete the merger of the region's two community foundations. He will consolidate the staffs and combine the assets of the San Mateo-based Peninsula Community Foundation and the San Jose-based Community Foundation Silicon Valley, which total \$1.5 billion. That complex task demands the skills of an industry insider familiar with the operation of a community foundation and the care and feeding of its donors.

His long-term challenge is to set goals for a merged foundation with added heft and a regional focus. It's wise to turn this over to someone from outside the valley, who can more easily unify the staffs and embolden donors behind ambitious goals.

Chilly Minnesota, with its populist heritage, and sunny Silicon Valley, with its libertarian streak, might seem worlds apart. But the issues that the community foundations there and here have focused on -- diversity, education, affordable housing -- are similar.

Both of the valley's community foundations have awarded grants and initiated programs efficiently and quietly at the same time their resources were growing exponentially. Under CEO Peter Hero, Community Foundation Silicon Valley was recognized for cultivating relations with donors. Under Sterling Speirn, Peninsula Community Foundation launched much-acclaimed entrepreneurial initiatives.

Those talents will be hard to replace. But Carson will bring a new element -- advocacy on social issues -- to the new foundation.

An African-American, he has written extensively on tensions between blacks and Hispanics and what philanthropy can do about it. Last year, he led Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation, formed to channel relief to victims in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

The Minneapolis Foundation has raised difficult social issues through ad campaigns. ``Minnesota, nice or not?" asked Minnesotans to examine their views on immigrants and minorities. ``Deleted for budgetary reasons" rallied people to fight state budget cuts for non-profits.

Carson will offer a forceful presence for the new community foundation as it pursues a bolder agenda.