The Cleveland Effect

Redefining place-based philanthropy

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THE ROCKEFELLER FOUNDATION · EST. 1913

More than 400 leaders came to Cleveland. Together, they put more than $350 million on the table.

Cleveland Mayor Justin Bibb with NBC TODAY's Al Roker at Big Bets for America: Cleveland, June 2026. Credit: The Rockefeller Foundation.

Executive summary

Cleveland is the clearest proof point on the Big Bets for America platform to date: it produced the platform's largest single-city commitment, the widest bench of local and state co-investors, and the clearest evidence that these convenings translate into named, funded action — not just conversation.

On June 9, 2026, The Rockefeller Foundation announced that more than $450 million in philanthropic, private, and public sector funding had been mobilized across its three Big Bets for America convenings since November 2025 — Oklahoma City, Baltimore, and Cleveland — bringing together 1,200 leaders in total.

Of that $450 million, more than $350 million was committed in Cleveland alone, announced at Big Bets for America: Cleveland, which convened more than 400 leaders including Ohio Governor Mike DeWine, Cleveland Mayor Justin Bibb, and NBC TODAY's Al Roker — with Roker's presence serving as a precursor for the Governor's $300 million Experiential Learning Initiative announcement to address talent gaps and bolster career awareness.

Cleveland was not just the largest single commitment of the platform to date — it was also where the widest range of local and state institutions chose to co-invest alongside The Rockefeller Foundation: the State of Ohio, JobsOhio, the Cleveland Foundation, KeyBank, Huntington Bank, an American art collective, and a Cleveland-based AI company all announced new commitments during the convening. That breadth of buy-in — sectors and institutions actively seeking to partner with RF rather than being recruited to the table — is itself a marker of what this platform has built.

Five pillars, one city

Cleveland's commitments weren't scattered across unrelated causes — they clustered around five priorities that, together, tell a coherent story about what it takes to rebuild a legacy city's economy.

01

Advanced manufacturing & site readiness

The Cleveland Foundation, the Wellman family, KeyBank Foundation, and The Rockefeller Foundation committed $13 million to the Site Readiness for Good Jobs Endowment Fund — renamed the Samuel T. Wellman Site Readiness Fund — to convert vacant industrial land into job-ready sites for employers who can hire locally.

> “The site ready project on rebuilding the manufacturing sector in Cleveland — potential for job creation and environmental revitalization work all in one.”
> — a Cleveland convening attendee, on the most memorable moment of the day

02

Literacy & talent

Ohio Governor Mike DeWine, Lt. Governor Jim Tressel, and JobsOhio announced the $300 million, 10-year JobsOhio Experiential Learning Initiative to close the state's technical talent gap — expected to help roughly 25,000 Ohioans advance through a technician pathway. First Lady Fran DeWine paired this with Ohio's literacy progress: 64% of Ohio kids now receive free books through Dolly Parton's Imagination Library of Ohio, with 27 million books mailed to Ohio kids since 2019.

03

Cleveland Clinic health innovation

A hard-hat site visit took convening attendees inside the Cleveland Clinic Global Peak Performance Center — a collaboration between Cleveland Clinic, the Cleveland Cavaliers, and Bedrock Real Estate that will serve as both the Cavaliers' new training home and a public community health and wellness asset.

04

Women's sports

This conversation explored women's sports as a force for economic power and civic transformation, and what becomes possible when investment, ownership, visibility, and cultural influence finally align.

> “Women's sports are no longer emerging — they're driving investment, shaping culture, and redefining modern economic development.”

05

Reclaimed waterfront

MSCHF — an American art collective — together with the City of Cleveland, Destination Cleveland, and North Coast Waterfront Development Corporation, announced a new permanent public art installation on Cleveland's waterfront: a multi-million-dollar investment in the city's civic identity, in celebration of America's 250th anniversary.

A city with a personal connection

1859

John D. Rockefeller launches his first business in Cleveland

John D. Rockefeller launched his first business there in 1859, and a decade later co-founded Standard Oil in the city — the venture that eventually gave rise to The Rockefeller Foundation itself.

More than 150 years later, Cleveland is home to institutions built on that same spirit of scale and reinvention, including the Cleveland Clinic, Case Western Reserve University, and the Cleveland Foundation, the first community foundation in the United States.

That history made Cleveland more than a convenient stop on the Big Bets for America tour — it made the convening a genuine full-circle moment, connecting the Foundation's founding city to its current strategy for expanding economic opportunity nationally.

Cleveland has also made clear it will not wait for opportunity to come to it: the city is actively investing in its neighborhoods, connecting residents to good jobs, and building the coalitions needed to drive inclusive, lasting growth — the same spirit of ingenuity and conviction that drew a young Rockefeller there more than 150 years ago.

“we were able to illustrate to out-of-town attendees the vision that is leading to generational change in Cleveland.”

— **David Gilbert** · President and CEO of Destination Cleveland

A marquee convening for cross-sector partnership

What distinguished the Cleveland convening was not only its scale but the unlikely nature of the coalitions it produced. Pro sports ownership groups sat alongside workforce development nonprofits; state economic development agencies sat alongside AI entrepreneurs; philanthropic leaders sat alongside community organizers — sectors that do not typically share a room, working on problems they do not typically tackle together.

> "The event brought together the public sector, private sector and philanthropy agreeing and focusing on the same 'big bets.' No one sector can make impactful change all by themselves. When groups are aligned they are powerful and effective."
> — a Cleveland convening attendee

NEW COMMITMENTS ANNOUNCED IN CLEVELAND

- Ohio Governor Mike DeWine, Lt. Governor Jim Tressel, and JobsOhio announced a $300 million, 10-year Experiential Learning Initiative to close the state's technical talent gap.
- The Cleveland Foundation, the Wellman family, KeyBank Foundation, and The Rockefeller Foundation together committed $13 million to the Samuel T. Wellman Site Readiness Fund to convert vacant industrial land into job-ready sites.
- Stemuli and the Cleveland Metropolitan School District launched an AI-native internship program giving students hands-on experience building and running AI companies.
- Huntington Bank announced a $10 million investment in the Cleveland Housing Investment Fund, bringing it past the halfway mark toward its $100 million affordable-housing goal.
- MSCHF, the City of Cleveland, Destination Cleveland, and North Coast Waterfront Development Corporation announced a new permanent public art installation on Cleveland's waterfront.
- The Center for Energy Workforce Development launched the Ohio Energy Workforce Consortium, extending its national workforce network into the state.

That range of named, funded commitments — spanning workforce, housing, arts, education, and energy — is the clearest evidence that this was a marquee convening, not a one-topic conference.

From the room to the neighborhood

The day itself was built to move attendees from conversation to proof. Plenary sessions surfaced the announcements — the $300 million talent initiative, the site readiness fund, the waterfront investment — and then, rather than closing with applause, the afternoon sent attendees out into the city to see the underlying work firsthand before regrouping for the closing commitments.

What set Cleveland apart was that attendees didn't just hear about the work — many saw it in person. Two site visits, offered for the first time at any Big Bets for America convening, gave attendees direct access to the realities behind the announcements:

Inside CCJDC: reimagining what comes next for incarcerated young people

Led by DeRay Mckesson and Campaign Zero, this small-group visit brought participants inside the Cuyahoga County Juvenile Detention Center — into the pods, school, and library spaces where residents live and learn. Cuyahoga County incarcerates more children than any other county in Ohio, with young people overwhelmingly coming from low-income Cleveland neighborhoods and facing significant barriers to education, mentorship, and opportunity.

“The visit to the youth jail. Wow. Very powerful.” — a Cleveland convening attendee

Cleveland Clinic Global Peak Performance Center: hard hat tour

A behind-the-scenes tour of the Cleveland Clinic Global Peak Performance Center — a collaboration between Cleveland Clinic, the Cleveland Cavaliers, and Bedrock Real Estate — gave attendees a look at the state-of-the-art training facility that will also serve as a public community health asset once complete.

“The tours were very helpful in understanding the work on a larger scale.” — a Cleveland convening attendee

For a philanthropy whose commitments can otherwise read as abstractions on a press release, that on-the-ground exposure mattered: attendees consistently pointed to these visits, not the plenary sessions, as the most memorable part of the day, and specifically credited them with turning the day's announcements into something tangible and credible.

"Taken together, the Cleveland convening points to a broader shift in what this Foundation's convening strategy is proving out: that philanthropy's role can be to convene the coalition, put real capital on the table alongside partners, and then make the resulting work visible and verifiable on the ground — not simply to fund it and step back."

"…a powerful vote of confidence in our people, our neighborhoods, and our future."

"…proof that the community had to prepare, invest, and partner in whole new ways."

That is the throughline distinguishing Cleveland within the broader Big Bets for America platform: not just capital mobilized, but a growing bench of local and state institutions actively seeking a seat at the table.

Results & impact

$450M+

Mobilized across all three Big Bets for America convenings

$350M+

Committed in Cleveland and Ohio alone

1,200

Leaders convened across all three cities

400+

Leaders at the Cleveland convening

NAMED COMMITMENTS FROM CLEVELAND

$300M	JobsOhio Experiential Learning Initiative — a 10-year workforce pipeline effort.
$13M	Samuel T. Wellman Site Readiness Fund — Cleveland Foundation, Wellman family, KeyBank Foundation, RF.
$10M	Huntington Bank investment in the Cleveland Housing Investment Fund.
Multi-million	MSCHF permanent public art installation, Cleveland waterfront.
New partner	Stemuli × Cleveland Metropolitan School District AI internship program.
New consortium	Ohio Energy Workforce Consortium, led by the Center for Energy Workforce Development.

Why it matters

Big Bets for America set out to prove that convening, done right, can move faster than any single sector working alone.

Cleveland is the platform's clearest proof point: a $350 million-plus vote of confidence from local and state government, philanthropy, and the private sector, built on relationships this convening created and grounded in on-the-ground visits that turned commitments into something attendees could see for themselves.

> **"Cleveland offers the model other convenings can be measured against: a direct line between what's announced in the room and what's visible in the neighborhood."**