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Struggling nonprofits seek new trustees

Board members can make up for funds lost in downturn

BY MIRIAM KREININ SOUCCAR

THE ECONOMIC DOWNTURN has futurist Edie Weiner extremely stressed out.

But it's not her business—advising corporations around the world on new trends—that she's worried about. She is desperately searching for eight trustees to recruit to the board of ThinkQuest New York City, a nonprofit she chairs that helps New York's youth become computer-literate.

Finding those directors, who must give at least \$5,000 a year and help with fundraising, is key to keeping the organization afloat. In dire shape, ThinkQuest has already lost \$400,000 in funding this year as Wall Street and banking sponsors reneged on their donations.

"I lose sleep at night [worrying about] my nonprofit not being able to make it," Ms. Weiner says. "It's overwhelming."

As New York charities lose millions of dollars in donations to the

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Seeking trustees

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recession, many are desperately seeking additional board members to help keep their organizations solvent. Because most boards require trustees to make a fixed donation, a larger board can mitigate declines in corporate and individual giving.

"There is more competition for funds than ever before," says Marilyn Machlowitz, a recruiter specializing in nonprofits. "Nonprofits are concerned with how they're going to meet their financial goals in the next

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year, and the solution is to add to their boards."

The race to recruit has taken on more urgency with Wall Street's recent meltdown. The demise of Bear Stearns—which required many of its employees to give 4% of their annual compensation to charity—and the layoffs at other Wall Street firms have resulted in an especially dismal spring social season, when many nonprofits have their annual galas.

Nonprofits of all sizes, from Citymeals-on-Wheels to Chess in the Schools, are trying to find new trustees to help fund their operating costs. The Robin Hood Foundation

is helping nearly 100 member charities recruit up to five new trustees each. And the National Executive Service Corps, a group that helps nonprofits, has seen a 25% increase in the number of charities asking for help with board searches this year.

Citymeals-on-Wheels, which delivers food to 17,000 homebound elderly New Yorkers, lost \$725,000 in donations in the course of a few days—Bear Stearns had long been the charity's largest corporate donor. Last year, Bear raised \$500,000 for Citymeals' annual fundraiser, the Corporate Dine Out.

To help stave off future losses, Citymeals hopes to increase its board to around 55 members from the current 43. Trustees need to bring in around \$50,000 a year, sources say. The organization is also looking to diversify its board members and reduce its reliance on the financial community.

"I'm gathering résumés from other industries that I will be putting before the nominating committee," says Marcia Stein, executive director of Citymeals. "We're definitely looking at who is not going to be as affected by [the credit crisis and the Wall Street downturn]."

Staying afloat

WEALTHY TRUSTEES can keep a nonprofit afloat during bad times.

The Children's Village, a 157-year-old charity that helps disadvantaged youth, sold 200 fewer tickets to its upcoming May 1 gala than it sold last year. But despite those losses, the nonprofit has already raised \$1.3 million more than last year's total,



FEEDING FRENZY: Marcia Stein (right), executive director of Citymeals-on-Wheels, is seeking 12 new board members.

thanks to an aggressive board. The 29 trustees at Children's Village are only required to give \$5,000 a year, but last year they gave \$3.5 million collectively. Still, the charity just recruited a new board member and is trying to recruit two more.

But good trustees can be hard to find. As even the rich feel the effects of the recession, many donors are being more selective about who they fund and how many boards they join.

"It's extraordinarily competitive to get board members," says Marley Kaplan, president and chief executive of Chess in the Schools, which is trying to recruit five new trustees. "There are a lot of nonprofits in New York. If you're a smaller nonprofit, you're still competing for those who want to be on the board of MoMA."

Even executives like Ms. Weiner, who know firsthand how hard it is

to find trustees, have been turning down invitations left and right.

Declining offers

IN THE PAST TWO WEEKS, Ms. Weiner has declined four offers to join different nonprofit boards or help with fundraising. She says she is being courted more than ever before, and has already resigned from her other

two nonprofit boards to concentrate her efforts on ThinkQuest.

"Everyone who serves on a board is trying like crazy to get funding this year," Ms. Weiner says. "I used to go to my friends' events or send in a donation, but you can't split your funds anymore."

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