

'Digital divide' targeted in e-Vermont project

Unlike Google's lottery-like "Fiber to the Communities" project, the e-Vermont initiative doesn't promise super-high-speed Internet to every home.

But e-Vermont will deliver: This summer, 12 rural communities will receive financial and technical assistance to connect residents, **businesses**, schools and local government or strengthen the digital connections they already have.

The tantalizing suite of tools awaiting the finalists includes free laptops for students, custom-designed neighborhood forums and hot-rodded **business** and municipal networks.

The catch: Communities must submit applications by April 30 to the Montpelier nonprofit Vermont Council on Rural Development, which developed the project in concert with Front Porch Forum, the Vermont Department of Libraries, Digital Wish, Vermont State Colleges, the Vermont **Small Business** Development Center and the Snelling Center for Government.

Residents in rural communities — and not e-Vermont's stable of experts — will shape the projects, said Paul Costello, the council's

executive **director**.

"Our goal is to encourage a massive infusion of interest in digital tools; to help community leaders with problem-solving and to promote an immersion in digital culture," he said.

A secondary goal: To build demand (or subscription "take-rate") in rural areas that have access to broadband — and boost Internet providers' commitment to **invest** further.

Upswings in online business and teacher training, neighborhood engagement and municipal services should convince broadband providers to take "rural routes" seriously, Costello said.

"We've been working on the 'digital divide' for 10 years, and we still have a lot of Vermonters without Internet access. It's not out of maliciousness on the part of the provider. It's because they want a return on their **investment**."

Applicant guidelines ask for projects that demonstrate a broad base of support and that are both imaginative and purposeful. There were about 30 submissions in Costello's in-box Friday afternoon.

Another round of 12 communities will be selected by e-Vermont later this year.

"About one-third of Vermont, by geography, is left out of the physical infrastructure for broadband," Costello said. "That translates into a

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psychological and cultural isolation, too. We want people to ask how their towns might become much more dynamic places for people to live. They know better than we do. We're going to follow them."

Mary Evslyn of Stowe, who helped design e-Vermont, said project partners would help disseminate innovations.

"This isn't just about a kid taking a laptop home and Googling 'Christopher Columbus.' We want to find out what kids can teach their parents; how people podcast selectboard meetings; new ways that people adapt their businesses online."

Some innovations will make the rounds with an urban spin. Burlington network innovator Michael Wood-Lewis is gearing up to extend Front Porch Forum, a community-scale system he pioneered in Chittenden County, to more isolated towns through e-Vermont.

"Hopefully, it will do there what it does here — getting neighbors talking to neighbors," he said.

Federal stimulus money will pay \$2 million for e-Vermont; local nonprofits, charitable foundations and corporations will provide a \$1.8 million match.

Sponsors include the Jan and David Blittersdorf Foundation, Comcast, Dell, Microsoft, the Evslyn Family Foundation, the University of Vermont's Center for Rural Studies, the Vermont Rural Partnership and the Vermont Community Foundation.

To learn more about the project and to download an application, visit the Vermont Council on Rural Development website: www.vtrural.org

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