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Kathryn Flagg Bristol

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BRISTOL — Bristol is one of 12 towns in line to receive a slice of \$3.8 million to strengthen Internet access in Vermont, and community leaders are hopeful the landfall “e-Vermont” grant could boost civic engagement and e-commerce while providing computers and Internet access to senior citizens and economically disadvantaged families.

The e-Vermont Community Broadband Project will arm a dozen towns across the state with digital tools and training to use the Internet to achieve goals ranging from job creation to school innovation. The 12 towns were chosen from more than 40 applicants, and e-Vermont will select another round of 12 participants in 2011.

“It’s the 21st century. We have to get with the flow here,” said Gerrie Heuts, the coordinator at the Bristol Recreation Department and a member of the group that applied for the e-Vermont grant.

The e-Vermont project is funded by a \$2.5 million stimulus grant from the U.S. Department of Commerce, and additional support has come from the Vermont Community Foundation, the Vermont Rural Partnership, and several other foundations and companies. The Vermont Council on Rural Development is overseeing the project.

Heuts said it wasn’t yet clear what share of the total e-Vermont funding Bristol would receive.

e-Vermont won’t be running cable or fiber to expand broadband access, but rather will focus on enhancing Internet access in places where it already exists. Each community that participates in the program will become part of their own “Front Porch Forum” network, using the Internet to link neighbors to each other and local services. Other perks will include new equipment in schools and libraries, online classes and workshops, and help to develop “e-commerce” applications like online marketplaces and new websites for local businesses.

Bristol earned its slice of the windfall grant after five local groups — the Bristol Recreation Department, Lawrence Memorial Library, Northeast Addison Television (Neat TV), the Pathways program at Mount Abraham Union High School and the Bristol Downtown Community Partnership — joined forces to make the case for awarding funding to the town.

Bristol’s goals for the grant are ambitious: The town hopes to create a free wireless hotspot that would encompass the downtown district, something Heuts said is sorely missed in Bristol.

“Right now we’ve got people sitting in front of the library after the library’s closed trying to take advantage of the WiFi,” Heuts said.

In addition to expanded wireless access, the Bristol e-Vermont team hopes to set up a “netbook” lending program at Lawrence Memorial Library. The program would let library users take out the lightweight, inexpensive laptops for short periods of time, and would make some machines available for longer periods to economically disadvantaged families during the school year.

The netbooks might also be incorporated in Bristol’s popular senior meals programs, where students from the Pathways program could team up with elders in the community to teach computer literacy.

“We’ve got elders in this town who are missing out on simple things, just like viewing pictures of their grandchildren online,” Heuts said.

The team’s grant proposal also calls for creating online directories of goods and services to drive business to Bristol; helping businesses develop e-mail newsletters and better websites; developing podcasts of educational workshops for local business owners; and creating online podcasts and videos for local historical sights, walking tours, and lodging, shopping and restaurant destinations to boost tourism.

Additionally, the Bristol e-Vermont organizers hope that the project could boost participation in local government and civic issues. Though Neat TV records meetings and events in the area, not everyone in the community has access to Channel 16 broadcasts. Neat TV’s website would become a designated “community news” hub, including live video coverage of school board and selectboard meetings, community events like the Pocock Festival and Fourth of July parade, educational events and lectures, and an online marketplace for goods and services.

The Bristol team also said the town needs help setting up chats, bulletin boards, community surveys and other tools to encourage a two-way flow of information between residents and civic leaders.

Now that Bristol has won its share of the e-Vermont funding, an e-Vermont team will be visiting the town to start identifying where to start chipping away at Bristol’s biggest online goals.

“It will just enhance Internet opportunities for people in Bristol,” Heuts said. “I think it could really play a big part in two-way communication with all kinds of things.”

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