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Cambridge an eCommunity

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by Mickey Smith

As a culmination of a process which started more than a year ago, last week, the town of Cambridge was notified they will be one of 12 communities around the state accepted into a program designed to improve their online presence and capabilities.

Members of the Cambridge community worked with the Cambridge Planning Commission and helped to apply for the eVermont program. Together they wrote a proposal and solicited letters of support from various community organizations and businesses.

A dozen rural communities were chosen from over 40 applicants across the state to receive digital tools and in-depth training as the initial participants in the new e-Vermont Community Broadband Project. The twelve will benefit from the expertise and resources of e-Vermont's statewide partners as the local groups develop ways to take full advantage of the Internet for job creation, school innovation, providing social services, and increasing civic involvement. Joining Cambridge in the program are Brighton, Bristol, Canaan, Grand Isle County, Ludlow, Middlesex, Newport, Poultney, Pownal, Sunderland, and West Rutland.

"Vermonters have a long history of innovation and finding creative ways to meet our goals," said Project Director Helen Jordan. "e-Vermont will continue that tradition by bringing 21st century tools to these communities and nurturing the local development of model solutions we can adapt statewide."

Dennis Shanley, co-chair of Cambridge's broadband committee, said the function of this grant is not to string the cable or fiber that would run a broadband signal, but it will help the community to better use the broadband services already provided.

According to the press release announcing the grant winners, an unprecedented network of partnerships will contribute to this two-year project, including:

- Each community will become part of the Front Porch Forum network, helping link neighbors to each other and local services.
- Digital Wish will bring technology into the classrooms (including a limited number of Netbook computers) and provide essential training for students, teachers, and parents.
- The Vermont Department of Libraries will work with local libraries to upgrade computer equipment and enhance e-services
- Students in the Vermont State College system will offer classes and workshops in both public and home settings
- The Vermont Small Business Development Center will mentor businesses to help them increase efficiency and grow their market share through e-commerce.
- Best practices that come from these communities will be shared through statewide symposia, on-line applications, and conferences organized by The Snelling Center for Government.

Shanley said while the program won't increase the high speed internet coverage area directly, he did say the functions of this program should increase awareness and demand which could lead to high speed internet providers wanting to expand their coverage area.

"They look at customers per mile," he explained, "not houses per mile."

Shanley said because the process is still in the early stages, they do not know how much money this will mean for the community, but they are very excited about the possibilities the grant offers.

The Vermont Council on Rural Development is overseeing e-Vermont, and will bring its expertise in community organizing to help each town connect its schools, government, businesses, and nonprofit providers in new and exciting ways. e-Vermont updates are posted at www.vtrural.org. Contact e-Vermont with any questions at 802-223-6091 or eVermont@vtrural.org.