

Vermont Towns Vie for Next Round of E-Vermont Broadband Assistance

Local Matters

By Ken Picard [10.27.10]

Earlier this year, the federal government announced that Vermont would receive the nation's largest per-capita share of federal stimulus money — more than \$170 million — to expand high-speed Internet access to every community in the state. It was welcome news for dozens of rural towns and villages that still don't get it.

Since then, most of the public debate about universal broadband access has focused on the infrastructure: Who will supply it, by what means, how soon and for how much?

But getting wired — or wireless — is only the first step. Even after every school, public library, town hall and downtown business district is online, there's no guarantee that people will know how to use the connections. To many Vermonters, especially older ones, the Internet is a vaguely understood, even intimidating, technology.

That's where the [e-Vermont Community Broadband Project](#) [1] comes in. E-Vermont's mission is to help rural schools, businesses and municipalities make the most of the new digital tools at their disposal. Funded largely through a \$2.5 million grant from the U.S. Department of Commerce, the project is also supported by a coalition of local philanthropists, businesses and nonprofit organizations.

In May, 12 Vermont communities were selected from more than 40 that applied to receive technical and educational assistance in maximizing their broadband usage. Over the next few weeks, more towns across the state will line up to be considered for the next round of assistance.

They'll be vying for 12 open spots that come with a variety of free services, including new computers for their elementary schools, training and consulting services for small businesses, web-design instruction for town governments and a host of other community-building tools.

Helen Labun Jordan is program director of the e-Vermont Community Broadband Project. As she explains, e-Vermont was one of only 12 programs funded nationwide to

receive federal stimulus money to “bridge the digital gap.” The Green Mountain approach is unique, she notes, in that each community gets to choose how to use these technologies.

“We’re actually starting with the question ‘What are your needs as a community, and how can we use broadband as a tool to reach those needs?’” she says.

Over the last few months, e-Vermont convened a series of meetings in each e-Vermont town to create a list of town-specific priorities. From there, each town formed a “broadband committee” to draft a plan that lays out its goals and how they’ll be reached. In effect, those plans will serve as examples for other communities around the state.

Many of the goals spelled out in the town plans use 21st-century technologies, such as email, Facebook, Nixle and [Front Porch Forum](#) [2], to reinforce old-fashioned Vermont values: connecting young people with elders; helping Vermonters stay in touch with friends and family out of state; finding new ways to increase civic participation; and helping Vermonters identify neighbors who live alone, are disabled or need someone to check on them periodically.

Another common theme that emerged from all the town plans is a desire to use the Internet to create a stronger local identity. For example, the 3600 residents of Pownal actually live in three separate villages — Pownal, Pownal Center and North Pownal — that are several miles apart.

One of Pownal’s goals is to use the email message board Front Porch Forum to boost community cohesion and spark livelier dialogue among its residents. The framers of Pownal’s plan say this could be an especially useful tool as plans move forward to convert the former Green Mountain Race Track in Pownal into a renewable energy park.

Likewise, one of the stated goals in Grand Isle County — the only e-Vermont pilot community that encompasses an entire county — is to “create greater unity” across the five disparate towns of the Lake Champlain islands.

“The towns in the islands each have their own unique identity,” says Ruth Wallman, who chairs the Grand Isle County Broadband Committee, “so one of the challenges has been: When there’s a project that’s bigger than just one town, how do we find a way to work together?”

One way is to set up a Front Porch Forum, and possibly a community access TV station, that serves all five towns collectively, rather than each individually.

In Ludlow, one of the town’s e-Vermont goals is to engage the out-of-state owners of second homes, who make up 86 percent of the town’s tax base.

Says Ludlow Broadband Committee chair Jill Tofferi: “It is our hope to attract our frequent visitors into becoming a more integral part of Ludlow, spending more time here working, playing and being involved.”

Labun Jordan predicts the next round of e-Vermont assistance, which wraps up November 17, will be very competitive. Although judges will be looking for geographical diversity among the applicants, potential e-Vermont communities will also need to meet certain basic criteria.

For one, a town must meet the federal definition of “rural” — population under 20,000 — and have a good understanding of the e-Vermont services offered; in the first round of applications, representatives of some towns didn’t realize they were getting services, *not* money. Finally, each town must have a proven track record of having worked collaboratively on a community project.

Labun Jordan adds that, while having some broadband access in the community is a prerequisite to becoming an e-Vermont town, a technical understanding of how broadband works is not. As she puts it, “We’re reaching out to people who don’t fall into that category.”

Source URL: <http://www.7dvt.com/2010e-vermont>

Links:

[1] <http://vtrural.org/programs/e-vermont>

[2] <http://www.frontporchforum.com>