E-VT reaches out to Vt. communities

Joanna Lyons 10 November 2010 No Comment

Part of Vermont's charm lies in a simple image of its landscape: quaint New England villages nestled in rolling hills dotted with red barns and cows. While this scene may dominate postcards, there is more behind these picturesque illustrations. Real rural communities in Vermont have been falling behind the technological trends. E-Vermont, a community broadband project run by the Vermont Council on Rural Development, provides rural towns with technological resources to take advantage of the digital age. The program works with the schools, businesses, local governments and health and social services of each of the 12 communities that applied and were selected to participate in the spring of 2010.

"It's largely a question of community capacity and readiness," said Helen Labun Jordan, an e-VT Program Director, referring to the selection process. Jordan said that they look for a diverse group of communities from across the state whose residents have been successful at working together in the past.

E-VT is funded through grants from the federal Sustainable Broadband Adoption Program, which is part of the Broadband Technology Opportunity Program (BTOP) included in the stimulus package. The U.S. Department of Commerce provided $2.5 million to e-VT. Vermont was one of 12 states to receive funding in the first round. Major corporations such as Dell, Comcast and Microsoft, as well as state groups such as the Vermont Community Foundation and Vermont Rural Partnership, have donated technological products and financial gifts. There is currently $3.7 million funding e-VT.

In addition, a network of eight partnerships forms the basis of the program and works to develop different areas in the community. "Digital Wish," a nonprofit organization based in Sunderland, Vt., works with local schools to provide training and resources for all students and teachers. The Vermont Small Business Development Center (VtSBDC) helps existing and start-up businesses take advantage of the Internet. Other partners include the Vermont State Department of Libraries and the Vermont State Colleges (VSC).

"Most of our partners are ongoing programs," said Jordan.

Yet each partner benefits from its participation in e-VT, as many have begun to work collaboratively. Though e-VT is a two-year program (as funded by the grants), Jordan said partners continue to grow after the program terminates. "Front Porch Forum," a group that provides an online community forum to connect neighbors, now works with 24 communities, and will expand statewide. Jordan also wants the program to reach those people in rural communities that were not selected by e-VT. Another partner, the Snelling Center for Government, will provide regular workshops and statewide conferences to educate more Vermonters.

One of the communities selected to participate in the first year is Bristol, Vt. After being selected, residents formed a local steering committee. The members, including the principal of Bristol Elementary School, the local public librarian, a member of the Bristol Chamber of Commerce and the director of NEATV, Bristol's local public television station, represented their sector of the community and explained why each could potentially take advantage of new technology. The committee then organized a public forum and gave residents a chance to voice their opinions about how the resources should be allocated. In August, after organizing ideas

suggested in Bristol's application to e-VT, discussions with the steering committee and input from the public forum, the Vermont Council on Rural Development developed a list of projects to be accomplished.

"We didn't tell Bristol what they needed to do, Bristol told us," said Phil Petty, the e-VT Community Director, who directs the program in Bristol along with five other communities across the state. "That's the how the Vermont Council on Rural Development almost always operates, from the bottom up."

Petty works closely with Sean Sheehan, another e-VT Community Director, who covers the other six towns, and with Jordan, who also directs individual projects in some of the communities.

Petty and Bristol residents have successfully implemented several initiatives, such as a one-to-one netbook-to-student program through "Digital Wish." Petty purchased 1,200 Dell net books at a reduced price loaded with software and the latest Dell processing system. Each e-VT school receives 50 computers and printers, as well. The one-to-one project also offers training for teachers and administrators, so they can better integrate technology into their curriculums.

"These can go home with students and involve their parents," said Petty.

At the end of the process, Bristol Elementary School will keep the net books and printers.

Bristol residents also hope to have high-speed Internet access in their community. Petty looks to accomplish this in a way similar to Woodstock, Vt., a rural community whose public library has beamed its internet connection, allowing free internet access to anyone who has a device with wi-fi capabilities. The network can also promote downtown businesses like Woodstock's network has done. Petty envisions a Bristol Business Portal with a list of local restaurants and companies.

Such long-lasting programs are critical because as the deadline for second round applications (Nov. 17) approaches, e-VT will focus on another 12 communities. It is important to Petty that programs developed now will continue over time.

"We don't want to build something that will be available for just one year," he said. "We want to get them [the communities] to demonstrate how programs will be sustainable over the long term."

Petty also acknowledges that there was a learning curve in the first year of the program, and that both he and Sheehan have improved at being "organizers, facilitators, cheerleaders, researchers and problem solvers." It has taken time to learn where the process can be streamlined, what community members are particularly helpful and how he can be a better communicator through the steering committee.

Jordan agrees. "The more you do a process the smoother it runs," she said.

Despite these challenges, those at e-VT are proud of what the program has accomplished so far, especially given its ambitious scope. "Nothing like this has ever been attempted on this scale in Vermont with this type of project area," Petty said. He believes the goals of e-VT are critical in a time when technology is "an essential tool of our life."

While the program does encourage rural areas to embrace the digital age, it is in the hope that the face-to-face community aspect is not lost.

"It's really important to develop digital culture around that idea of we're strengthening the daily lives and communications and not replacing them with anything virtual," said Jordan.