

Vermont's Digital Development Starts on the Front Porch

eVermont

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As America's cities become larger and life gets more complicated, some long for a return to a small-town lifestyle, where they are greeted by name, and the front porch -- overlooking a picture-postcard main street -- is a place to talk to neighbors. While this rosy view of rural living may not exactly square with reality -- especially in hard economic times with high unemployment -- the urge to enjoy a more rural lifestyle is attractive to many.

[e-Vermont](#), a consortium of [seven different organizations](#), has come together to improve the economic outlook of rural Vermont through technology, while at the same time preserving what's most attractive about a region better known for its maple syrup, skiing and mountain vistas than Internet connectivity and job growth.

eVermont

"eVermont is one of the sustainable broadband adoption grants that the feds gave out as part of the stimulus package," said Helen Labun Jordan, eVermont project director. "Which means that our overall goal is to increase the number of people who adopt high-speed Internet once it becomes available. But we take a different approach to it than a lot of the other programs. We come at it from the perspective of the community -- in our case, rural Vermont."

Jordan says that eVermont works in several areas of expertise -- small businesses, schools, libraries, digital literacy, municipal websites and more.

Small Vermont towns typically have three anchor institutions: the town office, public library and elementary school. eVermont partners provide assistance for each. Joanna Cummings, for example, who coordinates the eVermont Community Broadband Project for the Snelling Center, is a former state government webmaster and has developed a [town website template](#) which is now in use in 11 of the 24 eVermont towns.

One problem, said Cummings, is the lack of demand from people who haven't used the Internet and don't feel they are missing out. "There hasn't been good Internet access and people have been living their lives without it. So the companies in Vermont aren't going to bring Internet service to these areas, because people aren't demanding it. So we're teaching people about the Internet and encouraging demand for it."

But why create demand among those people who don't see the need for the Internet? The answer is simple: the future. Over the last several years, news articles have reported a declining Vermont birth rate and school population, as well as the nation's highest percentage of students who go out of state to attend college. "There's a lot of young people that do feel they are missing out and so we are losing our young people," said Cummings.

Technology and Town Meetings

As for those conversations on the front porch, there's a forum for that called "The Front Porch Forum." "It's not exactly a listserv," said Jordan, "it's a platform for neighborhood conversations, with the goal of things spilling over from online conversations to in-person conversations. Needless to say, public officials take a keen interest in that, not just to follow what's going on but to have an engaged citizenry."

Typical items on the forum might be someone selling firewood, eggs or a canoe. Missing pets are frequent items, as well as local government issues such as a proposed tax hike to pay for heating repairs at the school, which may be on the agenda for the next town meeting.

The forum seems well suited for a state with a tradition of town meetings. "Town meetings in New England mean something different than in the rest of the country," said Susan Clark. "A New England town meeting is actually a form of government. It is the legislative branch of our town."

Clark, a resident of Middlesex, is a sixth-generation Vermonter who co-authored [*All Those in Favor: Rediscovering the Secrets of Town Meeting and Community*](#). She wanted more frequent connections with her community than the once-yearly town meetings. So when she heard about the Front Porch Forum, she became a community volunteer.

"We're not a home-rule state, so we don't decide everything at town meetings," she said. "There's a lot that the state decides. But the town meeting is a place to come and have a real impact on issues." Communities with town meetings tend to rank high on civility, she said. "I suspect that the fact that we come together face-to-face on a regular basis to make real decisions is a factor on how we interact during the rest of the year as well."

And there's another larger benefit, said Clark. "When I go to town meeting ... it makes me more tolerant of different viewpoints and more appreciative of how difficult it is to govern. It makes us better 'small d' democrats. It makes us better at understanding how to be in a democracy when we ... have to take responsibility for the decisions. If we make a bad decision in town meeting, there's no one to blame but ourselves."

Clark said that in keeping with the benefits of face-to-face meetings, Front Porch Forum isn't anonymous, and the person's street address is also listed — something that might horrify big-city residents. And unlike social networking sites like Facebook, she said, "Front Porch Forum wants you to know what's going on in your community so you'll get out from behind your computer and go out and go to the yard sale or the town meeting or the school play or the concert or any of those things."

Clark said that the forum helps connect the public with local government, but she cautions against loading a forum with such things as planning commission documents at first. Wait until they are hooked on community events and items of personal interest, she said.

When Duane Sorrel, of Middlesex, moved to town he found out about Front Porch Forum at a town meeting. Sorrel, [in a YouTube video](#), said that when he posted his information, he got a dozen customers for his automotive business in the first two days. "My favorite post," he says in the video, "is 'lately there's been bears eating chickens.' That's been pretty interesting."

Infrastructure

Jordan said eVermont builds wireless zones off existing Internet service. "So it's a matter of having gateway connections and putting up repeaters. We build the landing pages, we have a template landing page for the zone. That is another way of letting people know what's happening in the town and then maintaining it. So we're just building off of what's already there."

Jordan said eVermont works through ConnectVt to interact with telcos and Internet service providers. The private sector is happy to work with eVermont, said Jordan. "They're happy we exist because -- going back to our original goal -- it will increase their subscriptions. We're agnostic as to who those subscriptions come from. We don't promote one provider over another."

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