

Vermont's Digital Stories

THE VERMONT COUNCIL ON RURAL DEVELOPMENT
FINAL REPORT ON THE DIGITAL ECONOMY PROJECT | 2014





A note about the report

WHEN we think of Vermont, we often picture our beautiful working landscape, our lakes and mountains, and our dynamic community centers. Our past is crucial to who we are as Vermonters and to the character and identity of this special place.

But the land we care for and our beautiful downtowns are actually the result of waves of innovation by Vermonters, a repository of our historical creativity.

Today we see a resurgence in that innovation, now in a context of international markets and global challenges.

Together, VCRD and our partners have worked to support community efforts to respond to the devastation of Tropical Storm Irene and seize the opportunities of the future through the Vermont Digital Economy Project. Really, we've used digital tools, the Cloud, and the Net, to support so many of our cornerstone values: community, mutual support, creative entrepreneurship, farm and forest enterprise, and strong downtowns.

In this summary report on our efforts, we share stories of Vermont resilience, renewal, and creativity.

We're proud of all that's been done, and we commend all our partners, as well as the many community and business leaders who put themselves on the line every day to build the best and brightest future for the state we all love.

Paul Costello, *Executive Director*
Vermont Council on Rural Development

Vermont's Digital Stories

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Telling Vermont's Digital Stories

A SMALL TEAM, led by the Vermont Council on Rural Development (VCRD) and its great project partners, has made a tremendous difference in Vermont communities, in hundreds of organizations (including both non-profits and small businesses), and, most importantly, in the lives of individual Vermonters.

We had just 18 months to leverage a \$1.8M federal disaster relief grant from the Economic Development Administration. The grant had an aggressive work plan to deliver eight different grant services in dozens of Vermont communities impacted by 2011 flooding. It was a unique project in that it bolstered virtual infrastructure, and not roads and bridges. >



In just 18 months, we exceeded all project objectives, and helped thousands of Vermonters across all 14 counties!

Introduction



Dozens of technical volunteers (above) donated their time and expertise to update websites for nonprofits at no charge.

(At right) Carl Russell, a sustainable logger and farmer from Bethel, Vermont, was assisted with free nonprofit small business advising.

More info: vtrural.org/vtconnected

THE VERMONT DIGITAL ECONOMY PROJECT PARTNERS WERE:

- Front Porch Forum
- IBM
- Microsoft
- Snelling Center for Government
- Vermont Council on Rural Development
- Vermont Department of Libraries
- Vermont Small Business Development Center
- Vermont State Colleges



Introduction

VCRD LAUNCHED the Vermont Digital Economy Project to offer free support to speed flood recovery, spur economic development and job growth, and improve community resilience to disasters. The project worked directly with Vermont towns affected by 2011’s floods to help businesses, nonprofits and municipalities expand their use of online tools. In order to support Vermont communities as centers of cultural and economic creativity in the digital age, we put technology to work in three critical areas:

- > Creating resilient communities
- > Building effective organizations
- > Bridging the digital divide

We accomplished these goals by increasing digital literacy and online workforce training, adding Wi-Fi and other public access points, bringing a community-based social network to every Vermont town, creating town websites and community calendars, promoting the use of “cloud” applications, and providing customized small-business and nonprofit training.



“The genesis for the project was the key learning we gleaned from Tropical Storm Irene: that is, that the towns with the best virtual infrastructures were both better able to cope with the disaster and also recovered more quickly from it.”

Sharon Combes-Farr
Vermont Digital
Economy Project Director



Tropical Storm Irene dumped up to 8 inches of rain on Vermont within a 6-hour period on August 28, 2011.



All 251 Vermont towns were negatively impacted by flooding in 2011.



The project actively delivered grant services in 50 of Vermont’s 60 most flood-damaged towns.

Flooding in Wilmington during Tropical Storm Irene was extensive and devastating. Above, hundreds of ruined books from the local bookstore await a dumpster.

Vermont Digital Economy Project Director, Sharon Combes-Farr (far left), visiting Rochester, one of the many flood-damaged communities served.

Creating Resilient Communities

VERMONTERS ACROSS THE STATE know that local action makes our communities vibrant. VCRD has worked to build local capacity for Vermont communities for more than 20 years. A founding principle of the Vermont Digital Economy Project is that a more connected community is a more resilient community. Many of our resources were deployed directly in Vermont communities.



VCRD has worked with dozens of Vermont communities to help them define projects critical for local development for over 20 years. Manchester is one such community.

More info: vtrural.org/vtconnected

Fostering resilience through better communications

- Created downtown Wi-Fi zones and hotspots to expand access for residents and visitors.
- Expanded local communication by using a community process to engage citizens and create or upgrade town websites.
- Moderated community-based, online forums and integrated community calendars for every Vermont town.
- Developed strategic planning to advance key Internet-based solutions to statewide challenges.



Downtown Wi-Fi zones were among the many services the project deployed to create community resilience. Rural Cambridge is one of the 26 communities with a new Wi-Fi zone.

Creating Resilient Communities

THE BENEFIT OF A PUBLIC WI-FI ZONE is that, especially in a disaster situation, it doesn't require significant amounts of power to continue operating. Wi-Fi zones can become key components of communications in a post-disaster situation, enabling coordination of community efforts even more quickly. Also, a free and public zone is always running, enabling students to find a place where they can do their homework close to home, and where others can check their email, or even apply for a job if they wish. In addition to helping to bridge the digital divide and become a communications tool during a disaster, having a Wi-Fi zone sends a signal that a town is informed, forward-thinking, and ready to welcome positive change.

The Johnson Connection (right) offers free Wi-Fi in downtown Johnson.

VCRD's Network Outreach & Communications Coordinator, Caitlin Lovegrove, (far right) works with Larry Straus of the Rochester select board.



The project implemented 26 downtown Wi-Fi zones and hot spots, for a combined 7.3 square miles of free Wi-Fi coverage.



“As we put in more Wi-Fi zones, the community aspect of the project became more and more apparent. The more inclusive a Wi-Fi project was in the development and implementation phases, the better chance it had of standing on its own into the future.”

Caitlin Lovegrove
Network & Communications
Outreach Coordinator
VCRD



Abbie Sherman, Assistant Town Manager of Bethel, worked closely with the project team on delivery of grant services.

CASE STUDY:
Bethel downtown Wi-Fi

The Bethel Wi-Fi project brought together the downtown business association, the municipal government, and the local school system to create a Wi-Fi zone that extends through much of the riverfront downtown of this highly flood-impacted small community. In a close-knit town like Bethel, a Wi-Fi zone can be transformative by being yet one more ingredient that strengthens the local economy.

“Town officials expect to continue seeing benefits stem from this Wi-Fi zone,” said Abbie Sherman, Assistant Town Manager of Bethel. “These benefits include giving the town another tool for providing the Bethel community with critical information. In addition, it will provide the community with an alternative to keep in touch with friends and family should we be faced with another disaster.”



“Beyond the overt economic benefits of driving users to a site that highlights Waterbury’s hotels, restaurants, and retail businesses, the system offers insight into Internet trends that can help with local marketing.”

Darren Winham
Waterbury economic
development consultant

Town residents (above) and project team members test the Wi-Fi zone on Waterbury’s town green.

CASE STUDY:
Waterbury, a first town

Waterbury was one of the first towns to apply for and receive services from the Vermont Digital Economy Project. The grant service that the town most desired was a free public downtown Wi-Fi zone. Additional funding from the Vermont Telecommunications Authority and local support from the Town and Village of Waterbury enabled installation of a very large Wi-Fi zone that lights up a significant portion of downtown Waterbury, from Stowe Street, down Main Street, to Rusty Parker Park. Additionally, it’s accessible from the Waterbury Library and the Dac Rowe Fields, providing open and public access to free Wi-Fi for any residents or visitors in downtown areas.



This high-water mark is a reminder of the flood damage, three years after downtown Waterbury’s devastation.



PROJECT PARTNER:
The Snelling Center
for Government

The municipal website collaboration and creation project was directed by the Snelling Center for Government. The mission of the Snelling Center is to foster responsible and ethical civic leadership, encourage public service by private citizens, and promote informed citizen participation in shaping public policy in Vermont.

The Snelling Center provides assistance to towns on best practices, and offers templates for town websites, along with a variety of other resources. The Center partnered with 25 towns to upgrade and build websites, creating a strong digital presence that contributed to regional economic growth in several important ways, including:

- > Integrating online tools for disaster preparedness, response, and recovery
- > Initiating community engagement to better serve the community through the town's website
- > Capacity building to promote sustainable website practices
- > Promoting economic development through the website



“Municipal websites have great potential to help unify a community, and involving citizens in their redevelopment process is critical for several reasons. Also, involving citizens in deepening their website’s usefulness will encourage them to become engaged with their town and stay that way.”

Tess Gauthier
Project Coordinator
VT Digital Economy Project
Snelling Center for Government

More info: vtrural.org/vtconnected

5 TIPS FOR TOWN WEBSITES:

1. Remember that a municipal website is a space for citizens to get information.
2. You don't need to have a technical person on staff to have a powerful, effective site, but training is important.
3. Get a plan in place for site maintenance from the start.
4. Start with a very simple site, and work forward from there.
5. Posting meeting minutes is key for any town website.

The Snelling Center's Tess Gauthier (at right) training Linda Martin from the town of Wolcott to make updates to their new website.



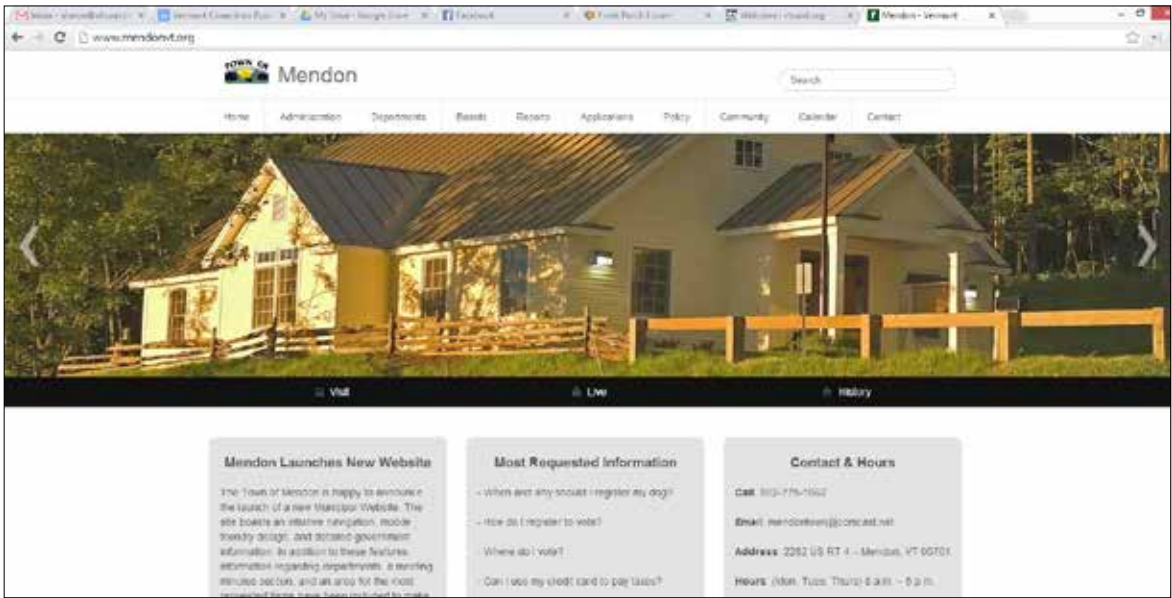
The Snelling Center delivered 25 municipal websites.

Creating Resilient Communities

WE HELPED CREATE MORE resilient communities by delivering 25 municipal websites. In Mendon, after Tropical Storm Irene, the community was completely isolated, forcing town officials to post information for citizens on the website of neighboring Killington. We tested the Snelling community process so that this community could have a website for the first time in its history.

“As Mendon moved from emergency response to recovery, the overhaul and redesign of the website was added to our ‘to-do’ list. But, unfortunately, due to Irene . . . we simply didn’t have the financial or technical resources to accomplish the task.”

Nancy Gondella
Office Manager
Town of Mendon



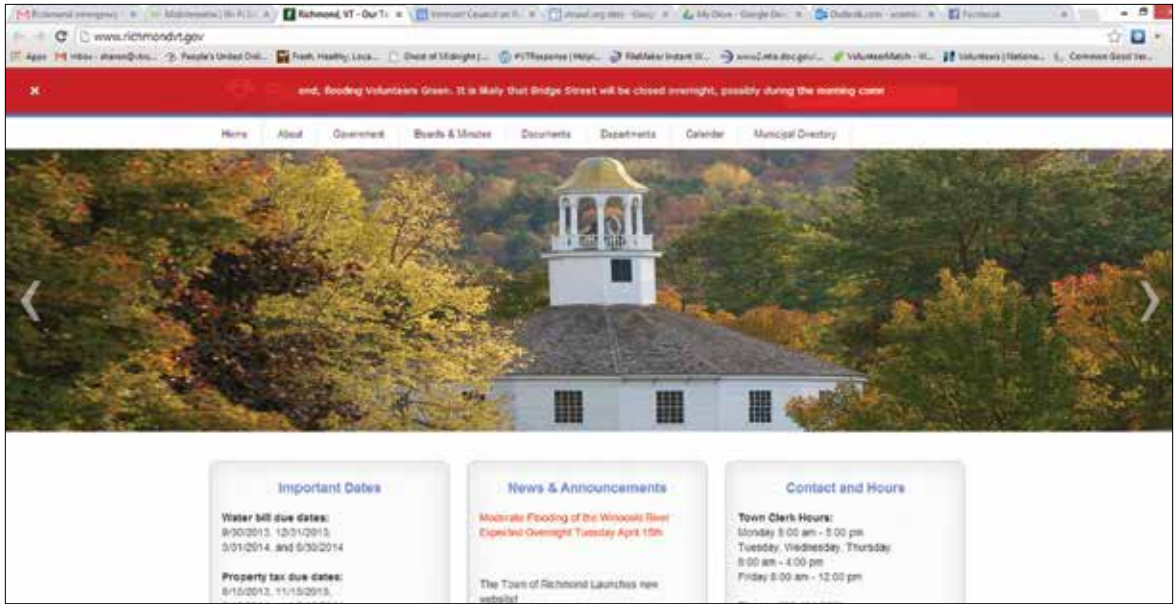
Mendon’s new website was the first of 25 to be created and funded by the project.



An emergency banner (red bar below) included in all town websites implemented during the project has already been used to alert townspeople of flooding in several towns, including Richmond.

“The enhancements to our town website made a real difference. We had several Richmond residents contact our office to thank us for providing proactive communication about the flood warning.”

Geoffrey Urbanik
Town Manager
Richmond



Creating Resilient Communities

We helped create more resilient communities by expanding Front Porch Forum to more than 150 previously un-served Vermont towns, where over 41,000 additional Vermonters are now actively using this homegrown community-building social network.

This free, community-building service enables neighbors to connect with one another in a moderated setting in which members are clearly identified as they share postings. These forums help neighbors find lost pets, welcome newcomers, inform each other of local events, and engage in healthy debates about the important issues in their community. In times of need, such as before, during, and after natural disasters, a Front Porch Forum becomes even more powerful.

Small organizations are at the heart of most communities, and they are often born directly in response to a community's need. This relationship only deepens once these organizations are established. They depend on their community to help raise funds, to advertise their services and events, and to find volunteers.

PROJECT PARTNER: Front Porch Forum

Front Porch Forum's mission is to help neighbors connect and build community. They do that by hosting regional networks of online neighborhood forums. Common sense and a growing body of research indicate that well-connected neighborhoods are friendlier places to live, with less crime, healthier residents, higher property values, and better service from local government and public utilities. Michael Wood-Lewis and his wife, Valerie (at right), founded Front Porch Forum in 2006 to serve their hometown of Burlington, Vermont. Amazingly, more than two-thirds of Burlington households now subscribe to FPF. Members have shared hundreds of thousands of postings among nearby neighbors regarding all sorts of topics: lost dogs, car break-ins, plumber recommendations, school budgets, block parties, helping neighbors in need, and much more. The Vermont Digital Economy Project enabled Front Porch Forum to expand to each and every Vermont Community.



“It’s humbling to see how Vermonters support each other when given an easy way to communicate with neighbors. Every day across the state we witness people rallying to help neighbors cope with all sorts of challenges ... house fires, new babies, losing a job, finding an affordable after-school-care option ... you name it.”

Michael Wood-Lewis
Co-Founder & CEO, Front Porch Forum



Vermont is the only state in the country with its own social network site in each and every community.



“Front Porch Forum posts continue to bear fruit, even though Miss Manners bemoans those choosing social media over personal contact. In fact, social media can bring community members together, in person, to feed one another.”

Sheryl Rapee-Adams
Founder and Manager
The Garden at 485 Elm

Across the state, organizations new and old are discovering that Front Porch Forum is providing them with a new and expanded ability to reach out to and converse with members of their community and others in their service area.

Montpelier is now one of the most active forums in the state. It is also where a community garden came to shape almost exclusively by connections and conversation that took place over Front Porch Forum. Now, thanks to Sheryl Rapee-Adams (founder and manager of The Garden at 485 Elm) and Front Porch Forum, more than a dozen Montpelier residents who did not have access to their own plot of land have gardens.

More info: vtrural.org/vtconnected

Creating Resilient Communities

EVERY COMMUNITY IN VERMONT now has access to its own online calendar, thanks to Front Porch Forum and the Vermont Council on Rural Development’s Vermont Digital Economy Project. This innovation comes from years of listening, planning, and work.



“Vermonters are dedicated to community, and community calendars can help bridge gaps, provide for mutual invitation, and broaden our sense of all that is going on in the diversity of even a small town. Everywhere we go, people are calling for this sort of structured calendar.”

Paul Costello
Executive Director
Vermont Council on
Rural Development



According to Lisa Byer, Executive Director of Catamount Access Television in Bennington and President of Vermont Access Network: “Most of our communities do not have network affiliates, so they look to us for information, making it important for us to get back up and running quickly after a disaster. I am very pleased to see that so many of our organizations came to this workshop, helping us to serve their communities.”

PROJECT PARTNER: IBM

We also helped create more resilient communities in Vermont with our project partner IBM. Consulting experts from IBM, through the company’s Impact Grants Program, helped tackle critical issues to aid Vermonters in becoming more prepared for disasters statewide. For example, IBM premier business continuity experts worked with dozens of critical Vermont organizations, including the Vermont Access Network and a dozen of its member community television stations, and the Vermont Foodbank and several food shelves within its network of 280 foodshelves across the state.

Building More Effective Organizations

WE HELPED BUILD more effective organizations through one-on-one advising and workshops that assisted organizations of all types to use social media effectively. Our work also involved building optimized websites and creating organization-wide efficiencies by using digital tools.

The two full-time e-commerce advisers at the Vermont Small Business Development Center—Pat Ripley and Nancy Shuttleworth—and Rob Fish, VCRD’s full-time nonprofit adviser, personally provided one-on-one digital skills and digital tools advising to more than 260 small businesses and more than 125 nonprofit organizations in 18 months. Together, they have also conducted more than 160 digital skills workshops.



Klari Emmons from the Kingdom Animal Shelter attended the Social Media Surgery in St. Johnsbury.

127

We served 127 nonprofits—

266

and 266 small businesses—

123

along with 123 farm & forest businesses



Pat Ripley and Nancy Shuttleworth (above) from the Vermont Small Business Development Center leading a small business workshop for the Okemo Valley Chamber of Commerce.



Nonprofit adviser Rob Fish (left) with Mike Bober, one of the project’s volunteer “social media surgeons,” prior to a hands-on group social media surgery workshop.

More info: vtrural.org/vtconnected



“There is an expectation on the part of modern consumers that your company or organization will have a professional online presence. This is not something you do once and forget about. A business that’s already in the digital space must also continue to evolve to remain competitive.”

Pat Ripley
e-Commerce Director
Vermont Small Business
Development Center

Pat Ripley, e-Commerce Director at the Vermont Small Business Development Center, leads an advanced social media workshop in Wilmington.

PROJECT PARTNER:
Vermont Small Business
Development Center

The Vermont Small Business Development Center (VtSBDC) provides no-cost business advising and low-cost training to all Vermont entrepreneurs starting or growing their own businesses. Its highly committed and professional business advisors work with business personnel in one-on-one, confidential sessions. The advising covers all areas of business, from start-up planning to loan package development to long-term growth strategies, and everything in between.

The Vermont Digital Economy Project enabled VtSBDC to have two full-time e-Commerce advisers on staff for more than 18 months to assist Vermont’s small businesses with a range of skills, including cloud computing, mobile marketing, how to get a business online, social media marketing, and how to leverage Google Tools.



The project team provided one-on-one digital skills and digital tools advising to more than 266 small businesses.

Building Effective Organizations



BACKGROUND: The use of digital tools often-times does not come easily to those who work in farm and forest industries. Some of the farmers we’ve supported claimed to have been “dragged, kicking and screaming into the digital world.” In one way or another, however, farmers have always readily adopted new technologies, from the latest technology in tractors, to the use of an iPhone to get the most up-to-date satellite imagery of the weather.



We aimed to serve at least 125 farm- and forest-based small businesses to help boost Vermont’s working landscape enterprises.

CASE STUDY: Farm & Forest Businesses

Earthwise Farm and Forest, in Bethel, is a certified, organic, draft-animal powered family farm owned and operated by Carl Russell and Lisa McCrory. It produces and sells certified organic garlic, milk, flowers, herbs, perennials, poultry (chicken and heritage turkey), beef, and non-organic (though GMO-free) eggs and pork, and lumber.

The farm is where sustainable logger Carl Russell now uses a mobile app on his project-funded iPad to help map his daily logging plan. In the wake of Tropical Storm Irene, as Russell’s business began to grow, he began to encounter a unique problem. There was plenty of demand for the sustainably harvested logs he provides, but the time-consuming nature of the process made supplying the logs difficult. Russell enlisted the help of the Vermont Small Business Development Center (VtSBDC) to address the issue and quickly went to work establishing a business plan for a cooperative effort from all sustainable loggers across the state, encouraging them to pool resources in hopes of meeting the ever-increasing demand for the product.



“All of the field work that I have done for years using clipboards and scribbled notes can now be managed with a mobile device that combines data collection and processing, document management, GPS/GIS, and visual detail with photography. At the same time, it provides in-the-field connectivity to Web-based resources, and efficient transfer of information to other media for sharing and marketing.”

Carl Russell
Co-Founder
Earthwise Farm & Forest

CASE STUDY:
Bridport Creamery

After two years of planning and consideration to find the best location for a cheese production facility, Nicky Foster and Julie Danyew (pictured at right) decided to build their Bridport Creamery on the property of Nicky's family farm in Bridport, Vermont.

Nicky's family milks 325 cows on 1,200 acres of farmland, where they've developed a well-known Brown Swiss herd of 110 cattle, including 50 milking cows that show nationally and are sold for breeding stock all over the world.

The cheese production facility was completed last fall, when Nicky and Julie found that they needed additional e-commerce advising to help get their small business off the ground. Nicky contacted the VtSBDC office in Middlebury for business guidance and funding resources. Sarah Kearns in the Middlebury office helped Nicky create a business plan and worked with her on financials, operating budget,

More info: vtrural.org/vtconnected



and marketing. Then, thanks to VtSB-DC's partnership with the Vermont Digital Economy Project, VtSBDC E-Commerce Business Advisor Nancy Shuttleworth was able to help Nicky and Julie build a website for their business.

She later offered her insight on website navigation, images, and function. Nicky and Julie had chosen a Web designer in advance to work with who had also created their logo. The Web designer is a friend, and they believed it was best to work with a professional whom they were comfortable with and understood them and their new business.



"We all met and brainstormed about what we would like to have on the website, a wish list of sorts, then we fine-tuned the list to the necessary and best content to get started."

Nicky Foster
Partner
Bridport Creamery



Nicky Foster and Julie Danyew



CASE STUDY:
Devastation and recovery
on the Battenkill

Camping on the Battenkill, a campground business located just north of Arlington on Historic Route 7A, has been run by the Pratt Family for over 50 years. The quiet family campground was devastated by Tropical Storm Irene and sorely needed a business boost as it approached the camping season less than a year after the storm. Free e-Commerce advising and matching funds from the Vermont Digital Economy Project helped the Pratts launch a new website.

“Finding help and money to fund and rebuild was not easy with the whole state of Vermont in crisis mode... The best marketing and public relations advice I received came from VtSBDC.”

Lesley Nase
Owner
Camping on the Battenkill



Project funding assisted 30 small business with new websites worth a total of \$75,000.



91% of small businesses advised recommend that their peers seek VtSBDC advising.



23% of small businesses advised hired new employees.



Families have been enjoying quality time together at Camping on the Battenkill for more than 50 years. This small family business has fully recovered from severe damage caused by Tropical Storm Irene.

Building Effective Organizations

WE HELPED BUILD more effective organizations by providing one-on-one and small group assistance to nonprofits to assist them in improving performance and mission reach, use of the cloud, build or market online delivery of services, and develop disaster preparedness systems.

“I have had the pleasure of working one-on-one with more than 120 nonprofit organizations of all types, methodically evaluating their current use of technology, and strategizing how various online tools can assist the organizations in becoming more effective, efficient, and resilient.”

Rob Fish
Vermont Digital Economy Project
Nonprofit Adviser
VCRD



VCRD's Digital Economy Project Nonprofit Adviser Rob Fish not only worked with 127 nonprofits, he also took an interest in assisting farm and forest small businesses with digital skills advising.



CASE STUDY: Black River Historical Society

We helped build more effective nonprofits such as the Black River Historical Society in Ludlow, where staff, all of whom are in their 70s, were empowered to use Facebook to promote their events and to use the “square” on a new iPad to take donations by credit card, increasing event donations by 29%. Anita Alic, Vice President of the Black River Academy Museum, said “Most of our sales and donations come from events, such as our annual gala silent auction which isn’t held at the museum itself. This is why we wanted to find a mobile solution for credit and debit card processing – to make it very easy for our donors and auction bidders.”

The Black River Historical Society's Director, Georgia Brehm, and Assistant Director, Linda Tucker, using “the square” on an iPad to take silent auction donations at their annual fundraiser.



127 ORGANIZATIONS STRENGTHENED — more than two-thirds provide vital community services, such as food, health, education, and senior care.



Building Effective Organizations



BY LEVERAGING TECH VOLUNTEERS who provided more than \$50,000 of free technical consulting, we helped more nonprofits in more highly impactful ways than we ever thought possible. This included our Social Media Surgery program, which assisted 150 nonprofits in 15 flood-damaged towns. Another 29 nonprofits were assisted with new or upgraded websites from Code for Burlington and other organized tech volunteers at 10 “hackathons.”

“The social media surgeries were a great way to get out of the office and connect with different people around the state. I loved hearing about all the many activities happening. It was fun to share what I knew and help move people further towards their goal.”

Nate Herzog
Principal
Story Hack



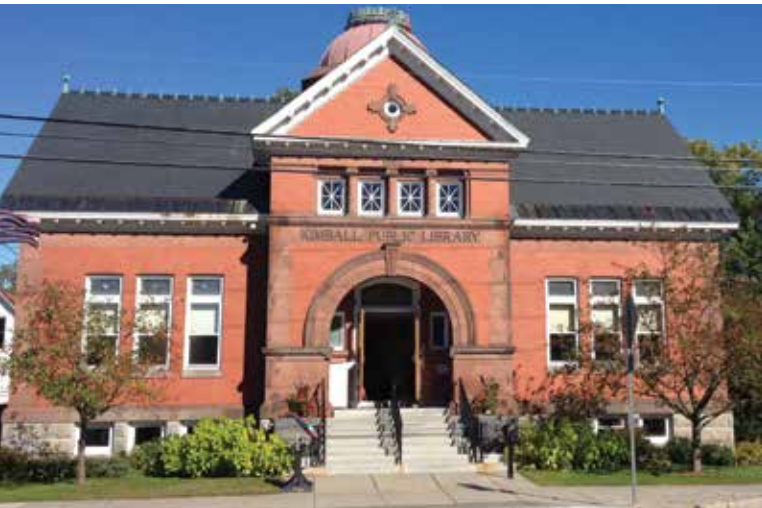
Several Web developers (above) volunteered their time, often on weekends, to assist nonprofits by upgrading organizational websites for free.

Nate Herzog (far left), principal of Story Hack, was one of the many volunteers who donated time to provide free digital skills advising to nonprofits during the project.

More info: vtrural.org/vtconnected

Building Effective Organizations

A SPECIAL INITIATIVE to create a new website template for Vermont libraries started with just one library in Randolph and culminated in a special “hack the stack” Web development event (also known as a hackathon) that upgraded websites for 15 Vermont public libraries. The WordPress template was funded by the project and the upgrades were made for free by tech volunteers.



The Kimball Public Library in St. Albans is one of 15 Vermont public libraries that will use the new WordPress library website template that was created by the project.

Bobby Maynard (far right) at the Deerfield Valley Rescue in Wilmington.

What is a Hackathon?

A hackathon is an event in which computer programmers and others involved in software development—including graphic designers, interface designers, and project managers—collaborate intensively on software projects. Hackathons can last a day or longer and often have educational or social purposes.

One of the many nonprofits that got a website upgrade included the Deerfield Valley Rescue in Wilmington. Its new website helps accomplish the organization’s mission to deliver emergency services in Southern Vermont.

“Thanks to the Vermont Digital Economy Project,” Bobby Maynard, at the Deerfield Valley Rescue, says, “you can now donate to our rescue squad, see our recently expanded coverage area, and learn about our safety training classes online.”



Bridging the Digital Divide

AS YOU CAN SEE, in our work to create more resilient communities and build more effective small business and nonprofit organizations, we helped individuals from all walks of Vermont life bolster their digital skills. Several of our grant services were specifically designed to help bridge the digital divide. The Internet Intern program placed paid college interns in two dozen libraries to work directly with patrons to provide one-on-one computer and Internet tutoring. The iConnect training class, a train-the-trainer half-day program on how to teach digital skills to others, was held in several regions throughout Vermont during the grant period. Finally, the Microsoft IT Academy curriculum was deployed in three locations to provide free, ongoing, online digital workforce education.



Delivery of every grant service included one-on-one computer or digital skills advising as a significant component.



Project Director Sharon Combes-Farr (above, rear left) hosted a monthly lunch-time session for local residents to learn digital skills in a fun and friendly environment.



Bridging the Digital Divide

THE INTERNET INTERN PROGRAM helped bridge Vermont’s digital divide by placing 24 Internet Interns — paid college students from the Vermont State Colleges system — in a program managed by project partners Community College of Vermont and the State Department of Libraries, in 24 of Vermont’s public libraries. This training connected seniors, the unemployed, and others to free digital skills training delivered at their own pace. More than 1,000 Vermonters were directly served with one-on-one digital skills training through the program.

One Intern estimated that she alone helped 12 different people find jobs during the program. There are also many stories about Vermont seniors like Jack, who was served out of the Brown Public Library in Northfield. He learned how to use a computer and email to create vital connections with loves ones — virtually.



49% of respondents said they most often sought assistance with email, and 47% with software applications. These were followed with questions about social network sites such as Facebook.*



100% of respondents said the experience “met or exceeded their expectations.”



92% reported that to continue to learn computer and Internet skills they would choose to work again with an Intern rather than an alternative.

**More than 100 adult learners answered our Internet Intern survey.*



“Access to high-speed broadband and free computers has long been a known barrier to digital literacy across the U.S. Now, with more areas of Vermont receiving better connectivity, and public libraries throughout the state offering computer access to all, the next most urgent need to bridge the digital divide is effective training for digital literacy.”

Martha Reid
Vermont State Librarian

Martha Reid, Vermont State Librarian, with Senator Patrick Leahy



“When I first started as an Internet Intern, I had no idea about the impact that I could have or the lives that I would touch. Because I am proficient with the Internet and know how a computer works, it didn’t occur to me that some people would not understand how these devices operated or even know how to perform a simple Google search. Through my work at both the Dailey Memorial Library in Derby and the Goodrich Library in Newport, however, I have discovered how pervasive digital illiteracy can seem, though I am doing my part to lessen this.”

Domenic Laurenzi
Internet Intern
Dailey Memorial Library, Derby
Goodrich Library, Newport



Many of those who sought help from the Internet Intern program returned several times. Over the course of many meetings, Interns did more than just solved immediate problems, they also helped patrons develop long-term skills to safely and successfully enter and take part in the online world. For some Vermonters, this development was truly transformative.



Domenic Laurenzi, working
with a library patron.

(Far Left) Staff members
of the Black River Historical
Society practice their
newly gained social media
skills.

Bridging the Digital Divide

THE VERMONT DIGITAL ECONOMY PROJECT

developed a free, three-hour training workshop to guide those who work with Internet beginners, including town librarians, state agency personnel, and staff at community organizations. The iConnect workshop helps participants get into a “beginner’s mind” and look at computers and the Internet through the eyes of people who have become unfamiliar and even intimidated by the technology tools that are second nature for many of us. Workshop exercises have participants playing the roles of teacher and learner to help them understand how to walk beginners step-by-step through basic tasks that they need to accomplish in order to find their way online. Workshop materials include a self-assessment to help beginners to know what skills they already have and instructions that they can refer to after a help session.

We also helped bridge the digital divide through the contribution of our project partner Microsoft, which donated free online digital workforce training that we deployed at three Vermont locations, including the CCV facility in Rutland, the Vermont Technical College in Randolph, and the Fletcher Free Library in Burlington.

More info: vtrural.org/vtconnected



“I was excited when I heard about the iConnect workshop. It helped me improve my ability to work with library patrons who lack digital skills. I hope to get my library certificate in order to continue this important work, by holding classes myself at other libraries.”

Mary Geoffrion
Rockingham

Mary Geoffrion (above) attended the iConnect workshop.

Caro Thompson (left), from the Vermont Telecommunications Authority, documented the work of the “Vermont Digital Skills Roundtable” to help bridge Vermont’s digital divide.

Bridging the Digital Divide



“Our library has been in the digital literacy business for over 10 years now. Offering online courses like this seems like a natural extension of what we already do,” says Robert Coleburn, (above) Librarian at Fletcher Free Library in Burlington. “We already offer a host of in-person classes at the library. Now, we’re really pleased to offer online classes through Microsoft.”

PROJECT PARTNER: Microsoft IT Academy

Microsoft IT Academy provides industry-leading technology skills to help bridge the skills gap. With ITA, academic institutions and their educators, students, and staff get digital curriculum and certifications for fundamental technology skills — as well as courses critical for students to be successful in today’s technologically evolving world.

“I love this. I do this job because I have a purpose and a strong sense of giving back to the community. I am really excited that we now have the ITA Academy here. Rutland can really use this type of workforce development.”

Mike Keogh
*Rutland CCV Academic
Coordinator and Workforce Liaison*



Mike Keogh, Rutland Community College of Vermont’s Academic Coordinator and Workforce Liaison, works with area students and continuing education registrants who sign-up for free Microsoft IT Academy training at the college.

The Future of Vermont's 'Digital Economy'

VERMONT'S DIGITAL ECONOMY is vital to the future of our communities and quality of life.

We hope that, like us, you have been inspired by the many compelling stories in this report of our partners and community leaders building resilient communities, creating more effective organizations and businesses, and bridging the digital divide. Their collective impact has been remarkable, and even transformative, over the 18 months of the Vermont Council on Rural Development's Digital Economy Project.

We told many of these stories at our September 2014 summit at the Vermont State House in Montpelier: "Vermont Connected: Envisioning the Future of Vermont's Digital Economy." The conference brought together more than 300 state, federal, and community leaders to encourage cooperative goal-setting

and mutual investment in response to key rural priorities in Vermont.

The event highlighted the five-year experiment of VCRD and our digital economy partners advancing a more vibrant, digitally connected environment in the state. While these efforts are now being completed, the compelling outcome of the work—fostering resilience and economic development through the innovative use of online tools throughout Vermont—is just getting underway. And the lessons we learned around everything from rural Wi-Fi to non-profit communications are available for others. As Vermont has advanced its physical broadband infrastructure, it has also advanced the culture of digital economic development; and the future is viral.

We are proud of our partners and the excellent work they have each accomplished: IBM, the Snelling Center for Government, the Vermont



(Above) Vermont Governor Peter Shumlin spoke to attendees of the "Vermont Connected" summit about the importance of broadband access to Vermont life.



Held on September 23, 2014, the Vermont Connected Summit brought together more than 300 state, federal, and community leaders to encourage cooperative goal-setting and mutual investment in response to key rural priorities in Vermont. Many of the stories in this report were shared at the Summit by Project Director Sharon Combes-Farr (above).

The Future of Vermont's 'Digital Economy'

Department of Libraries, the Vermont Small Business Development Center, Microsoft, Front Porch Forum and the Vermont State Colleges. Leveraging each of our strengths has helped us make strategically significant progress for Vermont communities—including over 1,000 community nonprofits and small businesses—helping them in ways that will have long-term implications to enhance the lives and livelihoods of countless individual Vermonters.

One of our goals is for “Vermont’s Digital Stories” to spark ongoing conversations around the topics of technology, digital literacy, and the tremendous power of online tools. These conversations have can transform daily life in the areas of education, organizational effectiveness, community resilience, and the creative economy.

We hope that all of our team’s work helps the state build on our past strengths and common values, while enhancing our ability to communicate, innovate, and lead for Vermont’s promising future.

More info: vtrural.org/vtconnected



(Top) the Creative Economy sessions at the Summit were dynamic and well-attended.

Summit participants (bottom) voted to add “leveraging digital tools to help Vermont’s poor and underprivileged” as a conference topic.

PROFILE: Vermont Connected Summit

“Vermont Connected: Envisioning the Future of the Vermont Digital Economy” was held at the Vermont State House in Montpelier in September, 2014. The event highlighted the innovative use of digital tools that build resilience into Vermont communities, keep businesses competitive, and assure that community organizations work more effectively throughout the state. The Summit discussions also helped define recommendations around important issues such as bridging the digital divide, keeping pace with ever-changing technology, open government, and promoting innovation and the creative economy. Nearly 300 participants took part in the landmark event, including many of Vermont’s top policy leaders and individuals representing a wide range of interests, all of whom were eager to further Vermont’s digital economy.

THE SUMMIT EXAMINED MANY FACETS OF VERMONT’S DIGITAL ECONOMY

- Educating for a Digital World
 - > K-12 and Beyond
 - > Bridging the Digital Divide
- Building Effective Organizations
 - > For Nonprofits
 - > For Small Businesses
- Creating Resilient Communities
 - > Open Data in Government and Beyond
 - > Resilience through Engagement
- Steering Vermont’s Digital Future
 - > Vermont’s Technology Industry
 - > The Creative Economy

Acknowledgements

THERE ARE MANY PEOPLE without whom the Vermont Digital Economy Project would never have come to pass, and organizations without which the team would not have been as successful in exceeding project objectives.

First of all, everyone at VCRD is especially thankful to the offices of Senator Patrick Leahy, Senator Bernie Sanders and Congressman Peter Welch of the Vermont Congressional delegation for strong support of this and many other projects “back home.” The heartiest of thanks goes to Senator Patrick Leahy and Ted Brady, formerly of the Senator’s staff, for all of their leadership and support of the project from its inception.

We deeply appreciate the leadership funding from the Economic Development Administration in the U.S. Agency of Commerce. We particularly thank Matthew Suchodolski of EDA for his unwavering support at each stage of our work.

Here at home, we thank Governor Peter Shumlin and his administration for their leadership, and Christopher Campbell and Caro Thompson, from the Vermont Telecom-

munications Authority, for their partnership and assistance.

VCRD especially appreciates the help and guidance of Mary Evslin, who was a key leader from the start of VCRD’s work on the digital economy, beginning with the e-Vermont Community Broadband Initiative.



Project director Sharon Combes-Farr, talking with Ted Brady, formerly of Senator Patrick Leahy’s staff. Ted provided critical support for the grant from the very beginning.

Although we highlighted them in many of the stories, we once again want to acknowledge the critical work of our Vermont nonprofit partners, all of which were sub-recipients of our EDA grant and performed vital grant services to our constituents. Our partners include the Snelling Center for Government, the Vermont Small Business Development Center, the Vermont State Colleges, and the Vermont Department of Libraries.

In addition to the in-kind matches contributed by our nonprofit partners and Front Porch Forum, the project wouldn’t have been possible without major donations from IBM, coordinated with the assistance of long-time VCRD board member Marie Houghton, and Microsoft, under the leadership of Richard Langford.

VCRD is proud of the brilliant accomplishments of its Digital Economy Project team: Margaret Gibson McCoy, who masterfully managed finances and navigated grants management; Caitlin Lovegrove, who led in WiFi development and network communications; Rob Fish, whose energetic efforts had transformative effects for non-profits throughout



The VCRD team took this selfie at a team outing. Front: Margaret Gibson McCoy, Sharon Combes-Farr, and Caitlin Lovegrove. Back: Rob Fish and Paul Costello.

Vermont, and especially Sharon Combes-Farr, who provided wonderful leadership as the project director to make the entire effort a terrific success.

Finally, the extended project team thanks the many town leaders and local volunteers in the more than 50 Vermont communities where we deployed project services. We were inspired every day by their vision and dedication to making their communities a better place.

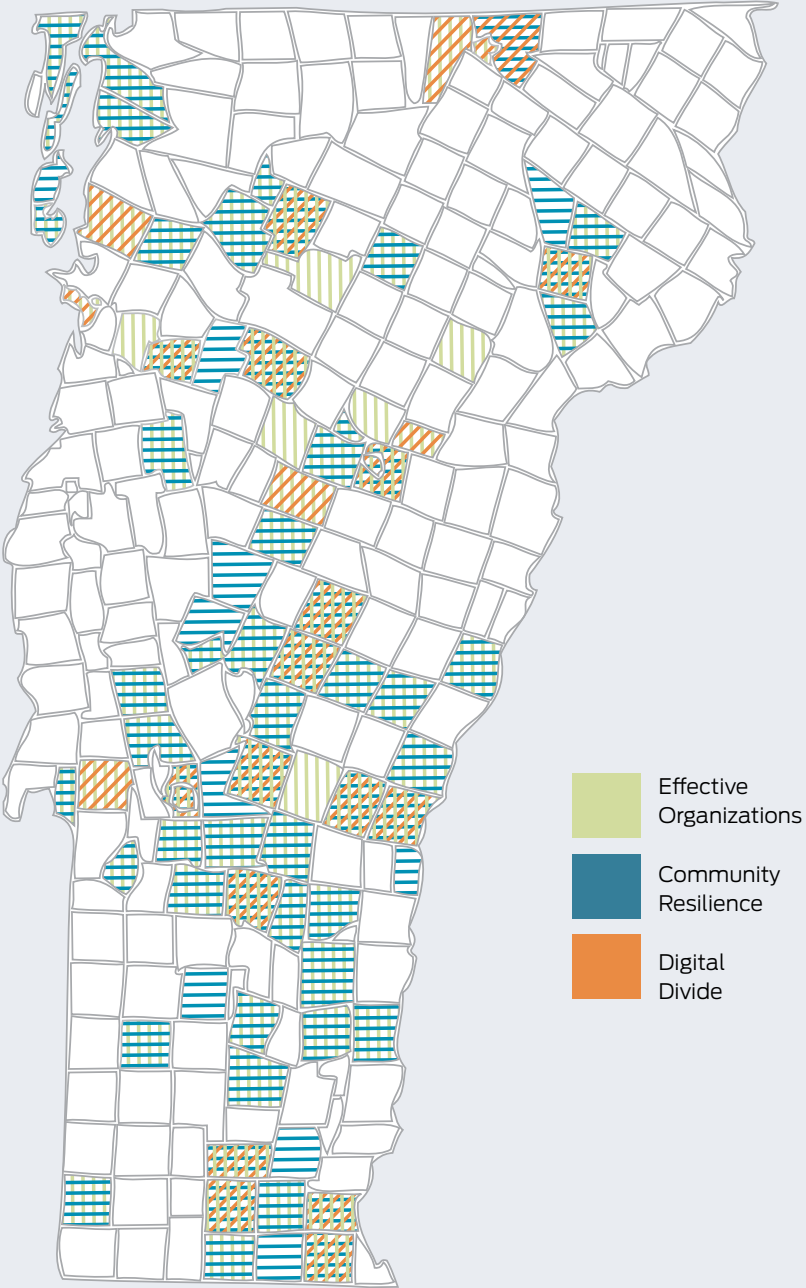
Vermont Map of Project Services

VERMONT DIGITAL ECONOMY PROJECT IMPACT BY COMMUNITY

VCRD's Digital Economy Project delivered multiple services in Vermont communities, concentrating in towns impacted by flooding in 2011. This map shows the extent to which the project team worked across the state to assist people, organizations, and communities to leverage digital tools. The team actively helped create more resilient communities, build more effective organizations, and bridge the digital divide in 83 Vermont towns.

Read More Online

Visit vtrural.org/vtconnected for a complete summary of the project, where you will find more in-depth digital stories. You can even explore maps of Vermont and discover more about how Vermonters, their nonprofits and small businesses, and Vermont communities transformatively leveraged digital tools.



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