Connecting Neighbors, Building Communities, and Raising Voices since 1994

Neighbors Forums
Imagine being able to reach hundreds of friendly, locally interested people instantly, easily:

neighbors@inyourarea.org

- What would you say?
- What would you like to hear?
- What might you do together?
Story

- Someone needed help.
- The Wheel of Cheese
  - Frantic request:

- Neighbor replies privately, “I am a former airline employee and I’ve been looking for a reason to go to Seattle. “Cheese makes it in time.

Read more – on Powderhorn Neighbors Forum – Photo CC jojomelons via Flickr
What are they?

- Neighbors Forums are a “local” online public place to:
  - share information, events, ideas
  - discuss *neighborhood* issues
  - gather diverse people in an open place
  - take action and promote solutions
  - Powered by two-way group communication
Who participates?

- Everyone – residents, some local workers, business owners
- People who “serve” the community
  - Local governments and non-profits (parks, libraries, schools, elected officials, police, places of worship, social service agencies, etc.)
- Diverse communities essential: [http://e-democracy.org/inclusion](http://e-democracy.org/inclusion)
- Numbers
  - Need 100 members for strong opening
  - 700 members on largest forum today ~15% households (that would be 30,000+ across Minneapolis/St. Paul proper)
One Forum, Many Channels

- E-mail
- Web
- Facebook
- Twitter
Online public space in heart of "real" local community

Neighbors Issues Forum
Technology: E-mail & Web Facebook Twitter

Subscribe once
Commitment secured
Post via e-mail/web

E-mail forward
Dinner conversation
Translated orally

Your Networks
YOU NEIGHBORS

City Hall
City Councilor
Neighbor #1
Community Org
Local Media Coverage
Reporter
Candidate
Local Biz
School, Library
Park Staff
Shared on Facebook
Neighbor #500
Neighborhood Leader
Forum Manager
Police
New Resident
Mayor
Examples

- Discussion
- Announcements
- Action
Examples - Discussion

- “Community life” exchange builds audience for respectful civic discussions
  - “Little Mekong” branding for Asian business promotion on University Ave

- E-Democracy.org’s other city-wide “Issues Forum” are more political by design - neighbors forum promote mix of very local civic issues and friendly community exchange
Examples - Discussion

- Topics like these:
  - Community news
  - Crime and safety
  - Crisis response
  - Schools and parks
  - Service provider recommendations – home repairs, child care, etc.
  - Family activities

- Helping neighbors
- Local history
- New small businesses
- Landlord issues
- Local environment/recycling
- Questions of every kind – What was that noise?

- What topic would you raise?
  - Blog post on 24 hours of topics:
    - http://blog.e-democracy.org/posts/1171
Examples - Announcements

- Community/cultural events
- Local news, photos, video
- Free stuff - *(selling rare/not promoted)*
- Small business introductions
- Elected official updates
- Lost or found pets

- In any language
  Bi-lingual announcements encouraged
Community garden anyone?
Examples - Action

- Local proximity encourages people to easily meet and act together
  - Community garden effort launched
  - “It’s cold” discussion results in winter wear drive to help recent immigrants
  - Sexual assault response by “Mom” and 700+ rally on a cold winter night, community brainstorming
How to join?

- **Via the web:**
  - [http://e-democracy.org](http://e-democracy.org)
  - Select “Forums” – Find forum
  - Then “Join the Forum”
  - Be sure to verify your e-mail address

- **Special promotional campaigns:**
  - Twin Cities: [http://tcneighbours.org](http://tcneighbours.org)
  - Christchurch, NZ: [http://neighbours.cc](http://neighbours.cc)
  - UK: [http://ukneighbours.org](http://ukneighbours.org)
How to join? Paper!?

- Via simple paper sign-up sheets

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Minneapolis Neighbors Forums</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Online Forum Sign-up – Join Thousands</em></td>
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Receive community announcements and discuss local issues.
Carefully print your first name, then last name, and e-mail.

- [ ] Check to Join Forum(s)
- [ ] Audubon Plk
- [ ] Cedar-Riv
- [ ] Corcoran
- [ ] East Harriet
- [ ] Field Regina
- [ ] Longfellow
- [ ] Near North
- [ ] Nokomis East
- [ ] Northeast
- [ ] Phillips
- [ ] Powderhorn
- [ ] Seward
- [ ] Standing Rock
- [ ] City-wide Issues
- [ ] Other/NEW Forum

- Please invite us to your community event
- Most effective way to launch or build forum
How to read?

- Read via e-mail or web
- Daily digest option - topics with direct links
- Text, files, photos, YouTube videos
How to post?

- Post via e-mail
  - “place”@forums.e-democracy.org
  - e.g. mpls-phillips@forums.e-democracy.org

- Attach any file (PDF, Word, etc.) – like an event flyer
- Attach photos – our website will resize them
- YouTube Video - link in text adds video to website

- Just “Reply-to-All “ to comment on existing topic
- Suggestion: Copy text from files into message body
How to post?

- Post via web
  - Login at http://e-democracy.org
  - Click on desired forum
  - New Topic:
    - “post a new topic” - “Topics” tab
    - Fill in text box, press “Start”
    - Add files (PDF, Word, etc.)
  - Existing Topic:
    - Login, read topics
    - Text box at bottom
How different? Online

- Online advantages
  - 24 x 7 – Anytime, anywhere convenience
  - Engage people unable to attend meetings, with limited mobility, two jobs, children
  - Less intimidating for some – open and accessible “ice breaker” into public life
  - Local approach coupled with in-person activities increases value and trust – Online only would be a major disadvantage
How different? Rules

- Civility matters
  - Real names build trust
  - No name calling
  - Post just 2 times a day (on most forums) spreads participation, retains audience
  - Facilitated by local volunteer “Forum Manager,” rules are enforced
  - Major contrast with often anonymous, nasty online news comments
How different? Approach

- Volunteer-driven, Non-profit
  - (Pictures of some of our awesome volunteer Forum Managers and contractors)

- Local scope key

- “Public life” openness not “virtual gated communities”

- Government can access us
  - Unlike Facebook which is blocked by many organizations

- Open source technology, sharing
  - We use GroupServer.org tech out of New Zealand
Join Us, Join Your Neighbors

- Join your local Neighbors Forum today!
- Every community needs a vibrant local online place that makes your part of the world a better.
  - The lowest cost model for effectively building real community and civic participation available today(?)
  - Start a forum. You can make this happen in your neighborhood. If you don’t who will?

- Contact us:
  - [http://e-democracy.org/contact](http://e-democracy.org/contact)
  - team@e-democracy.org  @edemo - Twitter
  - Tel/Text: +1-651-400-0880
Additional Slides

Go in-depth if you like
Tips for organizations

- Post announcements and events – reach hundreds for free
- Monitor the community agenda, advocate and organize locally
- Answer questions, share info
- Connect people to your programs
- Encourage your members/clients/etc. to join us
What results?

- Neighbors Forums promote:
  - Community building
  - Neighbors helping neighbors
  - Sharing/reusing things very locally
  - Engagement with government and accountability
  - And dozens of good things when more people participate in community and civic life
Mostly text

Pictures too

Across 50+ forums
Follow on Facebook?

- Yes, we reach people “where they are” via many channels and technologies

- Our “unified” integrated public forums
  - Facebook Page – Forum excerpts
  - Twitter – Topic headlines
  - “Blog” style Web Feed – Full-text
  - E-mail and web options – Most accessible, required to post

- E-mail key to active “bridge building” and mobile use – old-fashioned but EFFECTIVE
Future Presentations

- Stat tuned for more knowledge sharing
  - Inclusive Social Media Lessons, Evaluation
  - How to Start a Forum - Detailed
  - Forum Manager How-to Webinar

- Follow our blog for updates:
  - http://blog.e-democracy.org

- Key existing resources
  - http://e-democracy.org/if - Guidebook and more
  - http://e-democracy.org/webinars
Where are they?

- Our neighborhood-level “Issues Forum”:
  - 24 forums across St. Paul and Minneapolis
    - Many new forums - join our funded start-up campaign now
  - 25 start-up forums in Christchurch, New Zealand
    - Created for post-quake recovery by two volunteers
  - 5 in the United Kingdom
    - Where our “neighbourhood” level work started

- 11 “city-wide” online town hall “Issues Forums”
  - Extensive details: [http://e-democracy.org/if](http://e-democracy.org/if)
  - City-level forums provide place for city-wide issues and politics
  - Includes five Greater Minnesota towns
Start a new forum?

- **Request one:**
  - [http://e-democracy.org](http://e-democracy.org)
  - [http://tcneighbors.org](http://tcneighbors.org)
  - We technically set it up

- **Outreach essential**

- **10+ forums in start-up mode**

- **Lessons/training from:**
  - [http://e-democracy.org/if](http://e-democracy.org/if)

- **Recipe**
  - 100 start-up members
  - 1 local volunteer “Forum Manager” – You?
  - Paper sign-ups at community events
  - E-mail outreach, e-letter signed by initial members
  - Friendly round of virtual introductions with real people using real names to build trust
Introductions break the virtual ice.
Hosting a Healthy Forum

- Strong “critical mass” launch is key to success
- Need mix of local institutions – parks, officials, places of worship, community groups AND everyday residents
- Forum Manager plays crucial role – needed to “seed” forum with announcements until community groups begin to do it themselves
- ~10% of households across forum area is a magic threshold for “self-generative” community life
- Forum facilitation prevents difficult topics from turning into “flame wars” – one blow out can kill a forum
Inclusive Participation?

- Massive Failure Nationwide
  - Nationally “neighbors online” are not serving middle/lower income or immigrant communities well – huge missed opportunity
  - PewInternet.org research: http://blog.e-democracy.org/posts/858
    - 15% of Adult internet users with household incomes over $75K are members of neighborhood e-lists/forums
    - 3% of Net users under $50K, rural, Latino, etc.
    - 7% overall, more women than men, African-Americans and Whites equal at 8%
Inclusive Response

- **Our Response: Inclusive Social Media**
  - Started with Cedar Riverside, Frogtown, also Leech Lake with previous Rural Voices project
    - Funded outreach, paper sign-ups at events, “content engagement” relevant to diverse communities – first major funded and staffed effort since our founding in 1994
  - Ford Foundation major funder 2010-11
  - New funders adding neighborhoods in 2011
  - Seeking funding for major expansion, national lesson sharing for 2012-14
  - [http://e-democracy.org/inclusion](http://e-democracy.org/inclusion)