

Connecting Neighbors,
Building Communities, and
Raising Voices since 1994



Neighbors Forums

Imagine

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:
"Is anyone flying to Seattle in next 12 hours? I am stuck out of town. Can you take a wheel of cheese to the national competition? Ours went missing. Homeland Security won't let us overnight replacement."
 - 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."



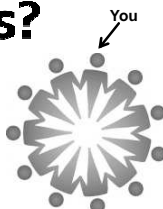
▪ [Read more](#) – on Powderhorn Neighbors Forum – Photo CC jojomelons via Flickr

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

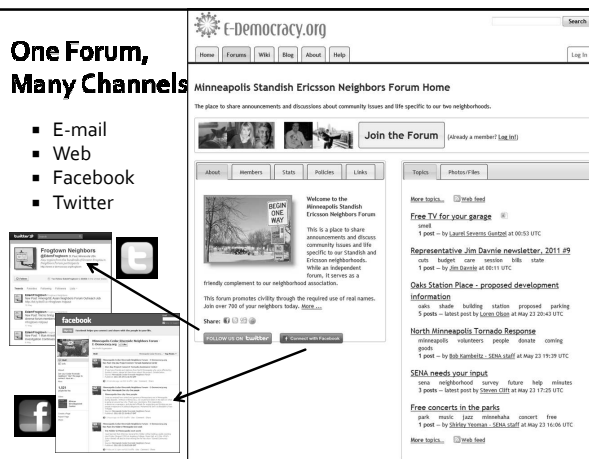
Who participates?

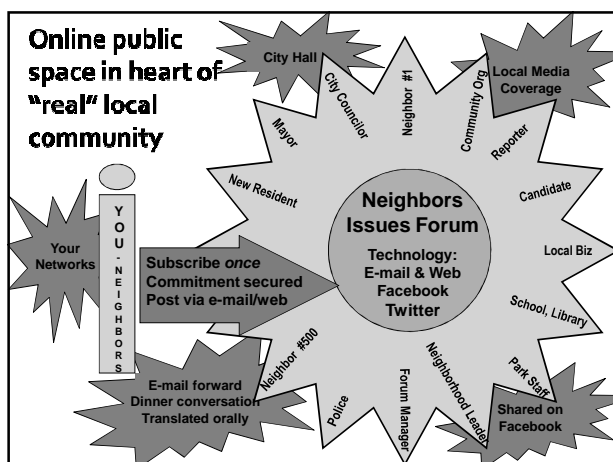
- Everyone – residents, some local workers, business owners
- People who "serve" the community
 - Local governments and non-profits (parks, libraries, schools, elected officials, police, places of worship, social service agencies, etc.)
- Diverse communities essential : <http://e-democracy.org/inclusion>
- 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





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
- Triple homicide - Who can we trust to keep us safe after a tragedy in East African grocery? Police? More guns? Led to off-line discussions with local teens. Vigil proposed, hundreds gather.
- 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>
- Select "Forums" – Find forum
- Then "Join the Forum"
- Be sure to verify your e-mail address

■ Special promotional campaigns:

- Twin Cities: <http://tcneighbors.org>
- Christchurch, NZ: <http://neighbours.cc>
- UK: <http://ukneighbours.org>



How to join? Paper!?

■ Via simple paper sign-up sheets

Minneapolis Neighbors Forums
"Online Forum Sign-up – Join Thousands!"
Receive community announcements and discuss local issues.
Carefully print your first name, then last name, and e-mail.

First Name _____
Last Name _____
Email _____

☐ Check to Join Forum(s)

<input type="checkbox"/> Madison Park	<input type="checkbox"/> Northeast
<input type="checkbox"/> Cedar-Riverside	<input type="checkbox"/> Phillips
<input type="checkbox"/> East Harmon	<input type="checkbox"/> Grandview
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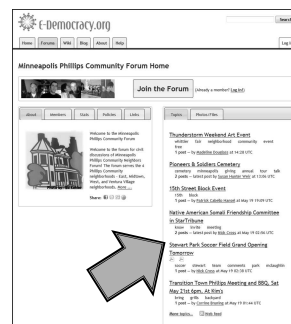


- Please invite us to your community event
- Most effective way to launch or build forum

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

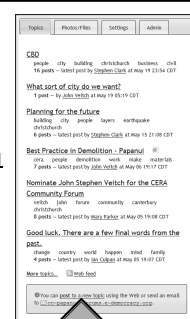
- "place"@forums.e-democracy.org
- e.g. mpls-phillips@forums.e-democracy.org
- Attach any file (PDF, Word, etc.) – like an event flyer
- Attach photos – our website will resize them
- YouTube Video - link in text adds video to website
- Just "Reply-to-All" to comment on existing topic
- Suggestion: Copy 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>
 - 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

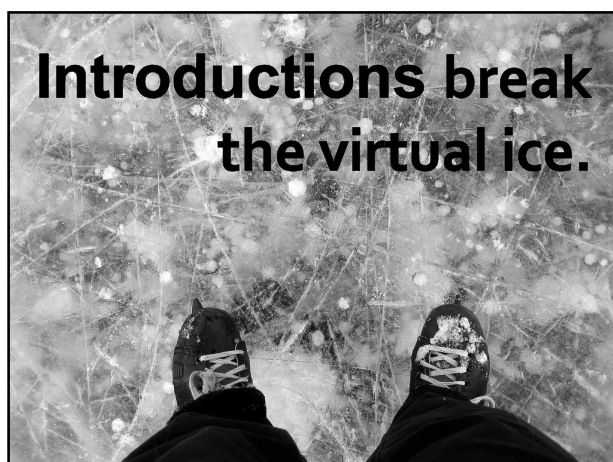
- Stat tuned for more knowledge sharing
 - Inclusive Social Media Lessons, Evaluation
 - How to Start a Forum - Detailed
 - Forum Manager How-to Webinar
- Follow our blog for updates:
 - <http://blog.e-democracy.org>
- Key existing resources
 - <http://e-democracy.org/if> - Guidebook and more
 - <http://e-democracy.org/webinars>

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>
 - 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://tcneighbors.org>
 - We technically set it up
- Outreach essential
- 10+ forums in start-up mode
- Lessons/training from:
 - <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>

