Rural Voices through Citizen Engagement and Media Online

A DRAFT proposal from E-Democracy.Org. Feedback to: team@e-democracy.org

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Minnesotans are proud of their tradition of civic engagement from the local level up. As broadband reaches into rural Minnesota, we must create meaningful connections among local people online. Connecting online to the world is important. However to avoid a "civic time drain," connecting people online to their local communities is essential.

This proposal seeks to promote the voice of rural Minnesotans through the Internet within their local communities laying the foundation for a statewide voice.

The two main goals of this 18 month initiative are to:

> 1. Share emerging lessons from online citizen engagement and media. This will promote grass roots citizen generated content and the interactive use of broadband in rural Minnesota communities.

> 2. Establish at least three online local Issues Forums in rural areas to promote active citizen participation and stronger communities. Led by local volunteer steering committees, the forums and locally selected citizen media features will be supported by the E-Democracy.Org network.

Local Democracy Online and Citizen Media Outreach and Training

> *Summary: Five citizen media and online engagement events and trainings across rural Minnesota to introduce opportunities, build skills, capacity, and discover leaders.*

We must leverage the individualized "MySpace" experience in private life toward community-oriented content "OurSpace." The broadband-enabled user-generated interactive revolution is described by such terms as Web 2.0, social networking, citizen media and more. While many of these tools add public elements to private expressions, citizen media takes these tools into public life. With this proposal, we seek to promote online citizen engagement and citizen media in **local public life across rural Minnesota**.

With our outreach partners, a series of public events and trainings will be organized in up to five regions across rural Minnesota primarily over the first six months of the project. We will hold the trainings in/near the rural communities expressing particularly strong interest in citizen media and local Issues Forums. In addition to introductory events (using multimedia with in-person presentations), short presentations will be offered across the communities we visit. This includes stopping by the local government or school or presenting at a service club, 4H, Chamber of Commerce, etc. or simply interviewing a local rural blogger to capture their tips and lessons.

The presentations, engaging area experts when available, may include topics such as:

- "Citizen" and Community Life Blogging
- Digital photography – Sharing via Flickr and more
- Placeblogging and Community Blogospheres
- Podcasting (audio)
- Video Blogging, YouTube, and more
- Issues Forums - Next generation online forums and facilitation
- Wikis - 'Edit this page' collaboration
- Social Networking - Using 'MySpace' for things local
- Online Community Calendars - Upcoming.Org, etc.
- Online Civic Events and Town Halls
- Tagging and Mashups – Aggregating local content and links
- Online engagement tools for community groups and local government

In addition to reaching dozens of individuals with new concepts, in communities with strong local leadership and accessible local computer labs, additional small group hands-on training is envisioned as part of a visit.

Sparking the use of citizen media tools to encourage highly distributed content generation by individuals, civic organizations, businesses, local media, and public institutions is a strategic first step.

In areas where the local spark lights a fire, the second step is to connect these often individual or single institutional efforts into community-wide online experiences. Those communities, with an emergent leader, interested in community-wide collaborative efforts will be invited to enter the second stream of this project. They will be supported as they establish a local Issues Forum along with citizen media features of interest such as a community blog, event calendar, etc. Promoting sustainability, based on realistic volunteer capacity and attention to ongoing costs is built into our process.

To promote peer-to-peer exchange, E-Democracy.Org will also host a "wiki" web directory highlighting citizen media/engagement examples across Minnesota and best examples from rural areas outside of Minnesota. To further develop skills and share lessons, interested outreach presentation attendees and Issues Forums leaders will be encouraged to join relevant online communities of practice across the Internet.

Online Citizen Engagement through Local Issues Forums – Phase 2

Summary: Launch at least three local Issues Forums in rural Minnesota communities. Provide extensive support and explore citizen media features leveraging the E-Democracy.Org network.

Issues Forums are a low cost, sustainable model for volunteer-driven agenda-setting citizen participation in local communities. E-Democracy.Org, based in Minnesota, currently supports 8 local e-democracy initiatives across 3 countries. See Appendix A for "What is an Issues Forum?"

Based on a conversation model requiring civility and real names, Issues Forums are an accessible starting point for sustainable online citizen engagement and media efforts. Leveraging our shared open source technology base, we support simple e-mail and web

participation. The ability to "publish" to the full community is as democratically accessible as pressing "reply" to an e-mail or posting via a web forum.

Through our training and outreach tour, communities expressing an authentic local interest will be identified for new local Issues Forums. Local E-Democracy groups require 5 to 10 start-up steering committee members and a volunteer Forum Manager before launching an Issues Forum. Sustained discussion is built from our key - before you open requirement - 100 registered participants no matter the population of geographic area within scope of the forum. Further "citizen media" efforts building from the seeded capacity offered by an Issues Forum may be launched by the local E-Democracy steering committee.

As communities (centered from a larger town or more broadly encompassing a rural county/region with a shared identity) are identified, E-Democracy.Org will provide:

> 1. Direct support to assist Issues Forum set-up (a 60 page guidebook details the process, see: http://e-democracy.org/if)
>
> 2. In-person training combined with a public launch/recruitment program that supports active and ongoing outreach to 'new voices' across the geographic area covered by the Issues Forum
>
> 3. Extensive support to the local steering committee including help recruiting and training a local volunteer Forum Manager
>
> 4. Our hosted technology platform (GroupServer) for their Issues Forum and internal steering committee communication
>
> 5. After or with the launch of an Issues Forum, additional citizen media tools such as WordPress for a "Community News and Life" blog or use of free or low-cost third-party services for multimedia content sharing and aggregation
>
> 6. The support required to foster sustainable volunteer-based activities well beyond grant support - this includes ongoing hosting, forum rules and governance process, legal protection, fundraising, and operation under our existing 501.c3 status

Local Determination, Shared Network

In addition to "public issues," the local steering committee through a local forum "charter" will determine the scope of the forum. In addition to local civic topics, "community life" discussions and local announcements will be encouraged to draw in more participation in less populated areas.

While the GroupServer platform supports discussions, file and photograph sharing, a participant directory, and other "Web 2.0" features, the new communities will be engaged in an effort to enhance this (and potentially others) open source tool with new citizen media features. With each funded expansion, sharing new value across the whole of the E-Democracy.Org network is essential. A pending "Neighborhoods Online Forums"

proposal in front of the MSNet fund of the Minneapolis Foundation will benefit the network including this proposed project.

The newly formed local E-Democracy groups will join committees/chapters in eight other communities (four in Minnesota including Winona, three in England, and one in New Zealand). This will sustain the long-term infrastructure required by building a network, sharing lessons and allowing rural Minnesota communities to leverage future investments in Issues Forums and citizen media components made elsewhere.

Selection Process

E-Democracy.Org will promote local e-democracy and citizen media across Greater Minnesota via numerous networks including the Blandin Foundation's Get Broadband communities, Minnesota Rural Partners, Minnesota Extension Service, MNSCU, among other key "outreach partners" (see Appendix B).

The proposed selection criteria that will be used by E-Democracy.Org to select the 3 pilot communities for Issues Forums are:

1. Local interest that demonstrates community/regional support (essential to forming a 5 to 10 person steering committee and recruiting 100 required initial Issues Forum participants).
2. At least one or two community members willing to take a lead role.
3. Interest on build from the core Issues Forum to include additional citizen media concepts.
4. Overall mixture of communities selected – geographic spread, type (highly rural area, regional center, small town, etc.), etc.
5. A willingness to continue their local e-democracy effort into the future.
6. Local in-kind resources or funding to complement the resources provided by this initiative.

Based on the first year's pilot experience in rural Minnesota, efforts to establish local e-democracy/citizen media efforts in communities with greater need, but less capacity should be explored.

Proposed Budget

One Year Budget - $48,500 TOTAL

$10,000 – **Outreach and Training Sessions – Phase 1**

- **Five Major Outreach and Training Events** – Extensive coordination, promotion, and communication will be required to host successful events.
- **Expert Participation –** Including in-person, video clips, training handouts, etc. This includes production of a reusable presentation and a multimedia version for on-demand viewing via the web.
- **Partner networking and location scoping efforts**

- **Identification of Minnesota and example *rural* blogs, citizen media, local e-democracy efforts**
- **Travel** – Presentations will be coordinated to minimize travel – perhaps 3 one week and two another.

$25,000 – **Issues Forum Development and Support – Phase 2**

- **Initial Issues Forum Outreach –** Will leverage the outreach provided by the presentation/training events across the state.
- **Issues Forum Development Sessions and Materials** – In-person training sessions held in the selected communities. Updating the existing 60 page Issues Forum Guidebook with key components converted into self-directed online lessons and reusable presentation training slides.
- **Leadership** - Tim Erickson, E-Democracy.Org's Forum Director, will be responsible for coordinating training, local steering committee and Issues Forum development, serve as the technology and hosting support coordinator, and provide day to day assistance to the local e-democracy initiatives.
- **Additional forum coaching** – Leading current and former volunteer Issues Forum Managers will be asked to mentor specific new local volunteer Forum Managers in rural Minnesota for one full year.
- **Recruitment and Local Outreach** – Outreach materials and public events will be required to assist local committees with the launch of their local e-democracy and citizen media effort.

$ 5,500 – **Technology Hosting and Enhancements**

- **GroupServer** – This is the open source tool used to host Issues Forums. It includes online discussions (e-mail/web), file sharing (including photos) and an important "who's who" member directory. Enhancements based on the input of newly formed local steering committees reflect their goals in the technology infrastructure.
- **WordPress** – This open source blogging platform has a number of features and plug-ins making it ideal for a "Community News and Life Blog." The key enhancement will be the integration of blog post e-mail distribution and comments with the local Issues Forum to sustain a critical mass for interactivity.
- **Aggregation** – E-Democracy.Org encourages the use of popular third-party tools that support the generation of "citizen media" and user-driven "Web 2.0" content. This was demonstrated in the Blandin Foundation funded "Voter Voices" section of the Minnesota Gubernatorial E-Debate – http://e-democracy.org/voices - in 2006. From YouTube (video) to Flickr (photos) and Del.icio.us (links) and Upcoming (event calendars). Aggregation is essential to display locally relevant content (sometimes called a "mash-up") along side the content generated with our own hosted technology (GroupServer, WordPress). This allows the cost-effective integration of multimedia and the presentation of a dynamic community homepage with content from multiple sources.
- **Training Session Equipment Costs** – If any. We will seek to use donated computer labs and equipment to the greatest extent possible.

$4,000 - **Project Coordination**

- Teleconferencing
- Fiscal management
- This proposal leverages the management capacity supported by Steven Clift's Ashoka Fellowship

$4,000 - **Research and Evaluation**

- Participant survey
- Resources to support graduate student or similar research project

Appendix A:

Why Join? What is a Local Issues Forum?

This is an excerpt from our 60 page guidebook available from: http://e-democracy.org/if

Simply put, a Local Issues Forum is an online public commons (or town hall meeting), where any citizen, journalist, or elected official can:

* post an idea
* ask a question
* make a public announcement
* connect with one another
* monitor public opinion
* ask for public input
* and where journalists can look for story ideas or identify sources for articles.

The goal of a Local Issues Forum is to give everyone a greater voice in local decisions and encourage more citizen participation in local public policy making. It also provides a forum for decision-makers to receive immediate feedback from the community on issues that must be decided or voted on.

One of the most important features of a Local Issues Forum is that it is citizen driven. Anyone can introduce a topic, concern or idea for discussion as long as it relates to an issue that impacts the quality of life in the local community. A Local Issues Forum empowers individual citizens to bring their ideas, suggestions and concerns to the forefront of public attention.

Why Should Citizens Participate in a Local Issues Forum?

A dynamic community is one in which citizens' interact and work together in a variety of constructive ways. Unfortunately, we all lead busy lives and it is not always convenient to attend a local meeting or interact with your local elected official. A Local Issues Forum provides an alternative means for you to contribute to the civic health of your community in a flexible manner. Here are some reasons why you might want to participate:

Top 5 Reasons, Why A Citizen Should Participate

1. Keep up with community happenings
2. Network with other local citizens
3. Ask questions – get useful information
4. Share your opinion on important local issues
5. Connect with elected officials and city staff

Top 5 Reasons, Why A Community Activist Should Participate

1. Place to post announcements about meetings & events.
2. Network with other community activists
3. Keep your local issue in front of the community
4. Keep your issue in front of the press
5. Keep up with NEWS in the community

Why Should/Do Elected Officials and Decisions Makers Participate?

Some decision makers/elected officials may be skeptical about the value of participating in a Local Issues Forum. They are concerned about becoming "too available" or getting "sucked" into another project. Here are some very practical reasons, why they might want to try it out:

Top 5 Reasons, Why An Elected Official Should Participate

1. Fear of being left out of important discussions
2. A great place to float trial balloons
3. Instant citizen feedback
4. Early warning system for "hot" issues
5. Dispel rumors before they do damage

Appendix B:

Outreach Partners

Outreach partners will be provided ten free tickets to each of the regional presentations/trainings for distribution and two attendee slots in our final statewide workshop.

Outreach partners agree to actively promote the initiative and share information with their members/network about the trainings and the opportunity to start an Issues Forums.

E-Democracy.Org will provide conference speakers and presentations for partner's statewide gatherings to introduce online citizen engagement and media from a "user-generated" content perspective upon request.

Agreed outreach partners:

- Minnesota Rural Partners – Jane Leonard - http://www.minnesotaruralpartners.org
- Minnesota Extension Service - Rae Montgomery - http://www.extension.umn.edu/AccessE
- KAXE – Northern Community Radio – http://www.kaxe.org - Maggie Montgomery
- Minnesota Journalism Center, U of M – http://www.mjc.umn.edu - Kathleen Hansen
- Institute for New Media Studies, U of M – http://www.inms.umn.edu - Nora Paul
- MNSCU - http://www.mnonline.project.mnscu.edu – Paul Wasko, Minnesota Online e-Services Director

*Proposed list for possible participation – **to be contacted***:
- Minnesota 4H – http://www.fourh.umn.edu
- Minnesota League of Cities http://www.lmnc.org
- Minnesota Association of Counties - http://www.mncounties.org
- Minnesota Association of Townships - http://www.mntownships.org
- Minnesota Library Association - http://www.mnlibraryassociation.org
- Minnesota Educational Media Association - http://www.memoweb.org
- Minnesota Newspaper Association – http://www.mna.org
- Minnesota Public Radio – http://www.mpr.org
- AMPERS - Association of Minnesota Public Educational Radio Stations - http://www.ampers.org
- Renewing the Countryside - http://renewingthecountryside.org
- Citizens League – http://www.citizensleague.net
- Minnesota Works Together, Center for Democracy and Citizenship – http://www.publicwork.org , HHH Institute, U of M
- Minnesota Rural Life Project, U of M - http://fsos.che.umn.edu/projects/mnlife.html
- Center for Small Towns, U of M Morris - http://www.morris.umn.edu/services/cst
- Minnesota Chamber of Commerce (local Chamber's host many local web sites) - http://www.mnchamber.com

- Center for Rural Policy and Development - http://www.mnsu.edu/ruralmn
- Minnesota Association of Small Cities - http://www.maosc.org
- Coalition of Greater Minnesota Cities - http://www.greatermncities.org
- Department of Natural Resources – Community Fire Prevention Network (use wikis for planning)
- Center for Advocacy and Political Leadership, U of M Duluth - http://www.d.umn.edu/~maplwww/