Good afternoon ... and thanks for joining us ... I'm Judy Simpson. The digital age is spawning a whole new language. Phrases such as mobile apps, search engine, and social media are well-understood by some, but they leave others scratching their heads. If you’re confused, you’re not alone.

Closing the digital divide is one role of the e-Vermont Community Broadband Project. E-Vermont is helping rural towns take full advantage of the Internet by emphasizing local needs, including economic development, school innovation, and community engagement. The E-Vermont project was launched about a year and a half ago with a combination of private funding and federal stimulus funds. Twenty-four Vermont communities are now getting training, education, and equipment through the project. Small businesses in those 24 communities are also seeing positive results from E-Vermont. While most businesses are aware that the Internet offers unparalleled opportunities to reach new customers, they are often at a loss on exactly how to harness that potential. E-Vermont’s partnership with the Vermont Small Business Development Center has led to some success stories, which we’ll learn about on today’s program.

Joining me is Pat Ripley from the Vermont Small Business Development Center. He’s here to explain the importance of bringing small business into the digital age – and to share some real-life examples of how E-Vermont and the S-B-D-C are helping small enterprises. Thanks for being with us!

Pat.: Thanks for having me Judy.

Judy.: Before we get started let's talk a little bit about the digital divide. Fill us in on the Vermont S-B-D C in general and what kind of help and provides.

Pat.: Sure. The SBDC the small business development center has been in Vermont for many many years. We have 12 regional advisers around the state and some additional employees that do more specified services there is regional offices around state and our regional advisors always offer what I would call more traditional business advising. They
would give you advice on bookkeeping, setting financial goals, and marketing your business among the slew of other things. Through e-Vermont I was brought on board and I am sort of the broadband person at SBDC. I can do things with basically anything Internet or find somebody who can help you. So we're expanding our services beyond the traditional business advising and counseling with the e-Vermont program. That's what we're here to talk about today.

Judy.: Can you give me some examples of some of businesses you've helped and the things you have done?

Pat.: I take it too pronged approach to Hal I do business counseling which is in line it how SBDC has always approach to business counseling. I do one on one time with businesses where we meet and have confidential conversation diagnose needs for problem areas or we look for ways to expand or grow but we also do workshops. Each of the 24 E-Vermont towns gets too small small business development center workshops. They can run the gamut from social Media Marketing two website design and those sorts of things. That sort of the approach I take with counseling. We have shown some good success with that. We have had a few businesses I can talk about. There's a fencing company known as gallon brook fencing in Cambridge Vermont. At back about October 2010 which started working together. They also run a farm and they had some concerns they were building their website for their farm wayoryeah valley farm and they had some concerns they were going to be able to take on the fencing development as well and had planned a waiting a year to do that. With our help they are working through that process. I just spoke with them a week are two ago and they've actually had to hire somebody a couple employees to handle the growth of their business that they attribute a lot to the web site. That's one of the many people we've talked to.

Judy.: That's fantastic. Also I know the organization is reaching out to businesses that have been hurt by the recent flooding.

Pat.: I was just down in Dover a couple weeks ago what we're seeing is some businesses have had to close their doors as a result of the flooding unfortunately but what we're seeing is the businesses that had a strong online presence are being able to keep their heads above water so to speak. We'd like to stress that more to people if you don't have a strong online presence this is one of the many things that can result from it is success in the face of disaster. I was actually in Dover I was mentioning a couple weeks ago doing a social media workshop. All the businesses we ended up talking about the flood most of the time we were there because their rights in the middle of a lot of the problem areas and they want to know how they could communicate with each other and we discussed various ways where social media can be helpful for that sort of thing. Those are a couple of the ways the flood has hit the forefront of what we're doing.

Judy.: Why is it important to bring small Vermont businesses into the digital age?
Pat.: It's kind of a simple question. Why is it important for business to be online well you will exist in 10 years is my main answer to that question. There's really not an excuse for reason why you shouldn't be online. In the world parts of the state you hear lot about word of mouth and that's how I do my business word of mouth. Things like social media are word of mouth. Their online word of mouth and people are using their fingers instead of their lips that's the only difference and it's often more effective. My main answer to that question is your business will still exist in 10 years. If you don't get on board with these tools you may be struggling to catch up.

Judy.: Is it intimidating for some small business owners?

Pat.: I think it is for a lot of business owners. These folks have been doing business for 25-30 years and doing it in a similar way. Sometimes it's great to them when you start talking to them about it which is why I try to work through deciphering the language that is getting put in front of them because they don't know exactly what web designers are talking about when they talk about Meta data and computer coding and that sort of thing which is why I think it's important to have an entity like the small business development center who can be a neutral source of information. I'm not trying to sell them anything I'm just trying to help them so that's why I think it's really important to have a position like this around.

Judy.: And that's you know obviously because of the broadband project very important.

Pat.: Absolutely. Without the e-Vermont broadband project we wouldn't be able to provide the services to businesses and I don't know of any other entity where the services are out there free of charge.

Judy.: We're going to show the viewers a map that highlights the 24 e-Vermont communities. You've been in these communities for about a year. What you offering of the clients?

Pat.: We offer one on one and workshops. We try to do two workshops in each e-Vermont community so that's a 48 business workshops over the course of two years. We've completed about half of those of this point. I was recently in Dover like I said. I'll probably be looking to travel to rich furred very soon and coupled with these workshops I can sit down with a business and talk confidentially about things that are maybe problem areas or maybe areas they can grow. That can go a lot of different directions. I may end up trying to help them get on board with social Media Marketing. I'm a talk to them about any mail marketing campaign. I may send them to one of our more traditional adviser's if I think there's something in their realm that could benefit the business. The one-on-one advising can go a lot of different directions. Sometimes we shepherd people through the web design process so it can really go a lot of different ways.

Judy.: Is it easy to reach out to these businesses and how did they find out about these workshops and what's going on.
Pat.: They can go to e4vt.org and all the workshops are there on a calendar. We try to do grassroots outreach within the communities because I've found that to be most effective. If you find that local leader who knows how to get the word out to the community get in a local publication and let folks know then that has proven to be really effective. Or they can go to VTSBDC.org my contact information is on there you can always e-mail me or give me a call.

Judy.: Have you had to change some of the things that you offer depending on what other small businesses might need?

Pat.: Yes the thing is with broadband technology is its constantly changing. It was a matter of days ago face book basically change their whole look and some of the functionality. I had clients emailing me I don't know how to use is now. So it's constantly changing environment so on costly having to adapt how the workshops are set up what sort of advice I'm giving to clients because they don't always have the time to keep up with this stuff.

Judy.: I was going to say that's a pretty big time commitment.

Pat.: Absolutely time is one of the biggest commodities any of these big small business owners have and if you're a Baker you're not necessarily that concerned with the latest change on face book. In that case I can be a good source of simplifying it and saying here's what you need to do and here's what we're going to change. A lot of times it's don't worry about it is not a big deal and you don't need to do anything.

Judy.: What is some of the feedback you get from some of the businesses that you've talked to or have helped? I know you talked about the fencing company and they've actually hired people which is great.

Pat.: Yes that's one of our main goals is to create jobs and revenue growth. I will give you another example of gal that I worked with down in Poultney she attended one of our social media workshops and she had actually been hit by the recession in 2008 and lost your job. She started JPW Accounting Services she decided she was going to start her own business. She attended our social media workshop at Poultney high school in December 2010. By taxis and she had her social media presence up and running she picked up 29 jobs within a couple months of opening up her social media presence and she still going I talk to her the other day online and her business continues to grow. We worked with also in Poultney the Poultney small business center right on main street. A fellow named chuck Calvin he was a longtime business owner in town and he owned a large building in the center of town and decided it's time to retire and move on but he wanted to continue to help small businesses. He had a concept of offering low cost rent to small businesses and lumping in your broadband service electricity and all that stuff. What I say low cost I mean very low cost until your business got up and running and then you read would steadily increase. We
worked with him to get a website going create a social media presence and I just talk to him the other day and he said he now has 10 businesses in the location ranging from retail to office to any number of different types of businesses in the space so that's a project were really happy with.

Judy.: It sounds like there's some pretty creative ideas out there that just need a little bit of a boost to get them going.

Pat.: A lot of people are sitting right on the edge and they want to take the plunge but they're not really confident or sure and that's where we can be there as a safety net to help them understand what's going on. All the creativity comes from the business owners we are just there as support.

Judy.: What's the biggest challenge for a small business that's not already digitally savvy?

Pat.: I think the biggest challenge tends to be trust. A lot is people don't know exactly. When you don't understand was some was talking about sometimes they get nervous and they don't tend to take the plunge because they're not comfortable. Without that level of comfort I understand why they're not willing to take the next step to move forward was something like this. They may not see the worth in something they don't understand. Creating a better understanding and comfort level around the stools and what they have to offer from a neutral party I think is the most important thing for business owners.

Judy.: I think it's a little overwhelming we think about how fast everything is changing digitally.

Pat.: Yes absolutely I've heard business owners say I do this now and I have to turn around a month from now and do it all over again. It's not always the case is a lot of misconceptions out there about online tools and how much money is going to cost. Many of them do not cost a dime. They will cost you some time though. There's a lot of misconceptions they need to get over and preconceived notions about how these things work and what exactly the commitment is and what do you get out of them. The good thing about online tools is once the folks get an understanding of the work I can show them exactly what they're going to get out of them. You can see the return on investment immediately and precisely a lot of business owners appreciate that once they see it.

Judy.: Yesterday on the program we were speaking with the state librarian Marty Reid about e-Vermont and she mentioned in all-day E-Vermont event on November 19 at Lyndon. What can you tell us about that event?

Pat.: I believe we do for workshops year. The spelling center is in charge of those and typically I do a business related workshop at the event and I make myself available for future meetings so folks have a minute to talk to me about the services and get my contact
information. I will be there I will likely be doing a workshop it could be on web site development preparing business owners for the web site development process. It's possible it could be on Google tools for small business they have a lot of cool things that can help a business that are free. I may also do a social media workshop.

Judy.: We have a minute left when you think the future looks like for Vermont business owners in need of broadband services?

Pat.: Unfortunately right now I think it's a little unclear. The e-Vermont program sunsets in May of next year 2012 at the end of May and right now we're really hoping that we can continue to offer these services two Vermont small business owners free of charge. Outside as I do not know of an entity that can do that. So we're really looking for some folks may be at the state level maybe the Federal level to help us with some funding so we can continue to offer this service to the business owners of Vermont.

Judy.: Once again for more information on the November 19 event specifically and e-Vermont in general you can check the project web site the addressees e4vt.org the phone number is (802)-225-6091. Thanks Pat.

Pat.: Thanks for having me.

Judy.: Sure. That's our program for today I'm Judy Simpson we will see you again next time on across the fence.

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