TRANSCRIPT

EPISODE DATE: 10/19/11

EPISODE NAME: The e-Vermont Community Broadband Project

Today on Across the Fence rural development in the digital age. Our series of programs on the e-Vermont broadband project highlights successes on communities around the state. Good afternoon and thanks for joining us I'm Judy Simpson. A lot of exciting things are happening at the intersection of technology and community development. But as more of Vermont gets access to high speed broadband how are our communities using these new tools to address local challenges and what kind of training do Vermonters need before they can effectively navigate this information superhighway? The e-Vermont project is finding answers to these questions as it works to bring digital tools and training to 24 of our rural towns. To update us on the Vermont we welcome the project Director Helen Labun Jordan. Thanks for being with us.

Helen.: Thank you for having me on the show.

Judy.: Over the past year and 1/2 we have featured several programs that focus on “e-Vermont” but for someone just hearing about it maybe you can give us a little background on what the program is all about?

Helen.: Sure the e-Vermont community broadband project is a two year program it’s funded through a Federal grant called sustainable broadband adoption. What that really means is we're looking at how Vermonters use high speed Internet as it becomes available. As the state builds out infrastructure to all Vermonters how do they then take advantage of all the opportunities that broadband brings. From business and education to local governments and civic engagement. That's what our project is focused on and as you mentioned in your intro were working with 24 towns around the state to help them take advantage of that broadband resource.

Judy.: How was it decided that these 24 towns would be used?

Helen.: This was through an application process so we're working across the state. The idea is to focus on rural communities that do have broadband available to them. So we're not building the infrastructure where there after the infrastructure becomes available and we're looking for towns there really excited about all the different ways across all sectors of their community that they can use online tools to advance their local goals.
Judy.: A lot of Vermonters have heard or read about some of the e-Vermont partner organizations and about some of the developments are going on in towns around the state. How is this all tied together?

Helen.: This is tied together in what we would call the digital divide. When we talk about the digital divide there's infrastructure as we mention the infrastructure is being built out so everyone can have access to broadband. Then there's the affordability can you afford it once it's there? Then there's the part that the Vermont looks at. The skills and knowledge to use the broadband when it's available. The partners that you've featured on your show that work in these 24 towns each have different areas of expertise. For example if you look at business is the small business development center is working with world businesses to say do you have a presence online? Can people find your contact information? Or to get more sophisticated can people buy things from your shop online? Do you have a social marketing campaign to get people to visit your bed and breakfast? And we have an adviser that works with businesses on that. We also work and schools so our partner digital wish the brings net books and training to classrooms around the state so that each student has their own computer and they can do research on line and they can make multimedia presentations in fourth grade which is something I learned to do somewhere in graduate school and can engage in education that way. We have a whole range of different areas of rural life that we work in.

Judy.: Is it up to each community to come up with these ideas?

Helen.: There are two different things that happen one is that our partner organizations bring a program. I mention the small business development center digital wish front porch forum another partner builds a platform for neighborhood conversation online. The department of libraries works with libraries to buy equipment for Internet access. The Snelling center for gov't will work with your local municipal governments and the Vermont State colleges will run workshops place interns and have a variety ways they support basic digital literacy. We have that great suite of services that our partners bring to each town. In addition the Vermont council on rural development which is the lead partner in this project has community directors. They will work with towns to select projects that fit in specifically with local needs. Those are projects that the town decides what they want to do and we help them make it happen.

Judy.: Is that part of the success do you think that it can be an individualized program in each town?

Helen.: Definitely it's part of the success partially because towns can select what they want but also because it emphasizes the philosophy in Vermont which is the tools follow the goals. We're not using gadgets or the latest cool Twitter feed because it's new and or of any use it for the sake of staying ahead of the trends. But we have towns selecting that they want to do in we match the tools to it. For example we work with some towns that have downtown districts where they want to support the businesses there. They do that by building Wi-Fi zones for public Internet access. That allows people to come downtown and shop or if they don't have access in their own homes they can come to the downtown and go to the businesses and get Internet access there. Or another example we work with Arlington and they really cared deeply about their local history. They have a great collection called the Russell Collection of local historic documents. They want to make it excess of ole to everyone in town and out of town. So we helped them digitize that collection and put it on line. It's really great to see towns think of what their goals are and find the tools to make that happen for them.
Judy.: You brought ashore clip that shows some of the things that we use broadband for maybe you can tell us a little bit about that?

Helen.: This is a PSA that was put together by middle students in South Burlington. Back to what I was saying about multimedia presentations happening to me and graduate school I don't even know how to do this at all. It was a great piece sponsored by Comcast which is one of the partners in this project. It's a really wonderful overview of what we're about at e-Vermont.

[music]

Judy.: I like that last part about hi grandma because there's a whole generation of people who are unfamiliar this cut of technology. Z also what you mean by the digital divide?

Helen.: Sure it's also a generational. Part of it is that we're using the Internet the things we never expected to use it for. Trying to apply for john today is an assumption that you can search for a job online or find a job online. State benefits if you one assistance with fuel or food or unemployment it's a very efficient system the state has put online for applying for those that of course you have to know how to use it. Or as the clip showed families just expect to connect online. Friends connect online. We're finding that people who didn't necessarily see computers as relevant to their lives before now are coming up with a new needs or new tools or they just simply want to be able to Skype as that clip showed. We have a lot of those Vermonters coming to e Vermont to learn the basics of the Internet.

Judy.: We've talked a little bit about libraries but that's become huge. People who cannot afford a computer at home or Computer Service of home this is a great resource in the community where they can go and do all these things now they are online.

Helen.: It's a wonderful partnership that we have with the department of libraries. They both have the equipment in the access to the Internet but we're also working with them on training librarians to work with folks who were coming to the library and have questions. I'd like to say libraries have always been our gateway its information. We think of as printed information that now they're also our gateway to digital information.

Judy.: Let's talk a little bit about these other projects. We talked about Wi-Fi zones in downtown's and also at libraries centers around around town so people can have access 24\7 which is one of the key components of this too

Helen.: Yes definitely that access is a key component. We're lucky in Vermont that we have a very aggressive schedule to build the infrastructure in the state. Although e-Vermont does not focus on infrastructure building we do keep in connection with projects like connect VT so that we have the full complement. People often compare broadband build out to rural electrification. Which is true the difference is that making use of that utility once it arrives is different than plugging in a lamp. You need a set of skills so to have a successful project you need to integrate both the skills and the infrastructure in access.
Judy.: I know one of the things involving schools we talked about the computers with the students. They'll bring those computers home and maybe the parents will learn a thing or two and find out this is how it works.

Helen.: That's right. Digital wish computers do go home and there's a lot of work that happens with helping the students be teachers. Digital wish which is our partner doing that has a mentorship program that they're developing now. Working with student and community members older students and younger students. It's a really great way for kids to become teachers within their community and within their family.

Judy.: Let's talk about some of the services we've been discussing and also building out from these communities to help the rest of the state?

Helen.: That's right we select a 24 communities as we said at the beginning and they're receiving the suite of services that we described. We're not taking on any new communities. It's a two year project and so we've taken our full share of communities and we're now developing resources for all Vermonters. If you go to our website E4 VT.org you can find the range of resources that are there. Particularly I want to highlight a regional conference that we have coming up that was organized by the Snelling center for government which is one of our partners and that's happy November 19 at Lynden State college there will be another one further south in February. That's a way to learn what the 24 communities have done. Many of them will be featured in presentation and panels. Also to me with other Vermonters who are interested in this question of the skills and knowledge using the Internet. I should say that conferences for people who are already comfortable using computers but want to take it to the next level and use it to support community work or business work or education work. We do have other resources online such as a webinar series which is also archived online and that has some more basic skills coverage that's also where we will announce workshops and other events that are available to Vermonters.

Judy.: So really this is a chance for people to learn what other communities are doing and taking some of the best from all these different communities say maybe this is going to work for us?

Helen.: Taking the best from other communities and also sharing what they know. One of the big goals a sharing information sharing best practices and just sharing the excitement of what online tools can do for rural communities. It should be a great event. The Snelling center has put together two regional workshops and won statewide conference already in the first year of the e-Vermont that had tons of great content. I do recommend that folks go to the Ford VT.org to see the lineup. We're dealing with everything from town meeting in a digital age to mobilizing community resources and emergencies to online tools for businesses. We have something for everyone and it's a great way to connect with other Vermonters as well.

Judy.: It can seem overwhelming to some of these topics and trying to figure out what's the best way to move forward. This sounds like it's more of an easier way to do that. Less confrontational and upsetting for people are saying this is what's going on in our community this is what we're doing and this is how you do it.
Helen.: You referenced the generational divide and folks who have gone for decades without needing to know any of this stuff and now are asking for a whole new skill set which can in fact be very intimidating. When you start with what do you want to do. Do you want to communicate better with your grandchildren. Do you want to be able to access online classes and learn new things? Do you want to access a radio online? Then it becomes something that's very tangible and very comfortable for folks because they're doing something that they already wanted to to just now have a new tool to do it with.

Judy.: I know some of the libraries are talking about the things they've been able to offer folks as far as computers and helping people apply for jobs especially if you don't have a computer that you're not using a computer and all the sudden all the jobs you're interested in say some in your resume online?

Helen.: Exactly. We're approaching a point where it's no longer an option not to be able to use a computer and luckily Vermont is investing for preparing for that day so that nobody is left behind but it truly is. When I think of knowing what's happening with college friends it's all online and through as you said the question of how to live life for jobs or how do I enroll in the benefits program? or even how do I download my tax forms? which is another big one.

Judy.: Right. Here's the contact information to learn more about the Vermont and the November 19 conference at Lyndon State college. Go to the web site e4VT.org or you can e-mail info@e4vt.org the phone number is (802)-225-6091. Thanks for being with us today.

Helen.: Thank you very much for having me on the show.

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

Across the fence is brought to you as a public service by the University of Vermont extension and WCAX TV

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture. University of Vermont Extension, Burlington, Vermont. University of Vermont Extension, and U.S. Department of Agriculture, cooperating, offer education and employment to everyone without regard to race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, and marital or familial status.