Today on across the fence we continue our occasional series of programs on the eve Vermont home community broadband project. As users and social network in gaining popular as if there are concerns that we are trading real neighbors for virtual ones. But Irene and other recent disasters highlighted the increasing importance of social media and other online technology. So we will learn how front porch forum is using technology to bring neighbors closer together and the creative ways that Vermonters are using this online tool. Good afternoon and thanks for joining as I'm Judy Simpson. I want to welcome two guests this afternoon's program Michael wood Lewis is the cofounder of front porch forum. And Susan Clark is chair of the Middlesex town solutions committee. Middlesex is one of 24 Vermont towns participating in the e-Vermont community broadband project. Thank you both for being with us today. Michael let's start off by talking about front porch forum what got it started and exactly what it does.

Michael.: Sure. Thanks and hello Judy. Front porch forum is a website that helps neighbors connect. My wife and I started it in 2006 and we now serve people in 60 Vermont Communities and the concept is really simple. You go online sign up and it's an easy way for you to connect with neighbors.

Judy.: Is it just for your particular community?

Michael.: Yes. Many rural towns in Vermont’s have one front porch forum larger places like the city of Burlington is divided into 30 different neighborhood forums.

Judy.: Two people use the forum for.

Michael.: Anything that people talk to neighbors about. Lost pets is a hot topic always. Borrowing tools finding a babysitter finding a job for a teenager looking for a ride to Montpelier on Wednesday. Just about anything.

Judy.: Now just a few years later you've been able to bring front porch forum two communities up and down the state. What do you think accounts for the rapid growth?
Michael.: I think there's a demand a need in today's culture for people to easily communicate with the neighbors. We are also busy going in different directions people move in and out of communities and it can be really hard to know your neighbors and I have time to talk with them so there's a real need. That's one part. The other part has been crucial is that e-Vermont initiative.

Judy.: Tell me a little bit about how that has helped?

Michael.: We're one of the several the Vermont Partners so as mentioned eVermont has selected to 24 communities around the state and those places have a suite of services we've talked about before digital wish with computers in schools and things and all sorts of great programs and one of those services is front porch forum.

Judy.: Susan you worked hard to get front porch forum to Middlesex why do you think that was so important?

Susan.: Let me say first that the suite of services that you talked about that e-Vermont brought has been really helpful to Middlesex. The computers for the schools and computer workshops for citizens. Front porch forum was our goal when we applied for the grant we really wanted to get better communication in town. It just seemed as if any issue we deal with in Middlesex and probably most Vermont towns could be made better if we had better communication from our neighbors. That was our goal. We felt as if even if we see each other as neighbors we're spending an awful lot of time in front of our computer screens or in front of our TV or in our cars and not just talking with each other. In might seem ironic that you want people to connect on a computer so that they can connect face to face but we find that it really does strengthen the fabric of the community and get people to know about a community event or to know about something that is happening with their neighbor and they do get out of the house since each other face to face.

Judy.: So how did you launch the front porch forum as far as getting people to know about it and to use it? Was that hard to do?

Susan.: What we did was we went because we're so excited about it I think word of mouth is really helpful and we went to a lot of the regular town events like a town meeting election day and school events and we had had little table and said here is what front porch forum is it's really simple to use it's just an e-mail. People who have a love to hate relationship with their computers can use front porch forum very easily. We found old people of young people people who are very computer savvy and people who really don't use computers very much all find that it's very friendly and easy to use.

Judy.: That's the whole thing about e-Vermont is that they're asking communities and individuals what is it that you want to get out of this? Even on that particular level you can tell people it's what you wanted to be as far as the front porch forum in your experience with it.

Susan.: Yes.

Judy.: So what you finding?
Susan.: Certainly neighbors connecting with neighbors. People who want to borrow a canoe or one to recommend a piano tuner or Plummer. You put one question on front porch forum and you'll get a dozen answers from neighbors which is really really helpful. Also local businesses find it very useful because if I may get my oil changed I just assume have to be done by somebody that I know on front porch forum I can find that person. People are swapping stuff. We have one neighbor or coupled neighbors who track the weather so we'll find out this part of our town gets more snow than that part of our town we knew. Wildlife sightings people love to talk about where the bears have been in the compost are not. It's really fun to read people get up in the morning and want to read it.

Judy.: So now Susan you are the moderator of the town and you also coauthored a book have with UVM professor frank Bryant on town meeting. What your thoughts about online technology when it comes to municipal issues gov't in town services?

Susan.: I firmly believe there's no substitute for face to face interaction. We need to know each other and Vermont is and ever going to work just by tapping on keyboards. But on the other hand it really helps to show up at town meeting well informed. Our discussions are going to be that much richer if the citizens have had access to information have had access to municipal officials and ask questions. you can post a question on front porch forum and say article nine says this does anyone know what that's about? And then someone else can pose to response and maybe a link to the town web site where there's further information I really think it can strengthen our local democracy

Judy.: Some people get to town meeting and understand what the articles are all about.

Susan.: Yes exactly.

Judy.: Michael in the wake of Irene a lot of new reports and stories mentioned how important front porch forum was for neighbors trying to keep in touch. Were you surprised about that?

Mike.: I can't say I was surprised. We saw it in the springtime with the flooding of Lake Champlain as well up in the islands. People made great use of front porch forum and in the wake of Irene as well in places like Richmond and Mooretown and other places that bore the brunt. It was incredibly inspiring to see as we saw all across the state people turning out volunteering and neighbors helping neighbors it was a little different with front porch forum was people could actually ask their neighbors for specific help and get organized on Thursday we're all going to be here and on the next day or all their help over there. Outside of the areas that were hard hit front porch forum was to use a lot as well. There were neighborhoods I'm remembering one of the new north end of Burlington where a person said I know somebody who is struggling down in the southern part of the state. Here's a list of what they need. I'm going to collect in my garage from the neighborhood and we are going to take it down on Wednesday. So that's what they did was total grassroots relief effort that couldn't of happened easily without that tool. We were really grateful to be able to help in that way.

Judy.: Susan what were some of the examples in Middlesex?

Susan.: We had a similar experience. In Middlesex there were a few places that were hard hit and neighbors were able to. I remember one house in particular that was devastated and of course they
didn't have Internet anymore or anything else but their neighbor posted and said this coming Saturday and Sunday come on over to this address and we're going to help renounce that house. Will they got 30 people on Saturday crawling all over that house and they didn't even need anyone on Sunday they got it all done on Saturday. Just a really great of specific help there but also in Middlesex of course were right next to water berry and water berry was very hard hit and there was very specific updated information how we in Middlesex could help out where are the places you can show up to help and where are the places you can send money or resources. It's really a great networking tool.

Judy.: It's interesting because even places that work it you mentioned Chittenden county area I know a lot of people are dying to find out how they could help and what was really needed so this was a good way for them to get that kind of information. On yesterday's program we talked with the project director of the e-Vermont about the November 19 event and conference at Lyndon State College. It's designed to share what's been learned over the past using broadband for community development. What will you be each talking about at the conference?

Michael.: I'm looking forward to it I think it will be a great collection of people and we're going to be sharing some lessons that we've learned on how communities set up front porch for a and attract a crowd in use it to its best affect.

Judy.: What are some of the examples of that?

Michael.: There are so many. We were joking the other day with some folks about the otter headlines we've seen. I think it was three miniature horses missing and the next post in Starks Perot red below it was found three miniature horses we were pretty sure those were the same courses in fact they were. It's fascinating because front porch forum starts with the premise that no message is too simple or basically we're looking for a small talk looking for the chatter and when people talk more with their neighbors on a daily basis whether it's virtually or preferably Susan said face to face then when trouble does visit in the form of Irene or a house fire or whenever then the neighbors are much better and able to respond because the conversation has been flowing already. That's one of our big lessons is you do not have to wait for a big event to use front porch forum. The disaster town meeting or whenever not that town meetings are a disaster sometimes it can be.

Judy.: It helps it not be.

Michael.: That you should talk about baby sitters and lost dogs and who knows a good plumber. All that is an investment in community.

Season.: I think that's why front porch forum is such a great name it's the kind of conversations that we should have and used to have and maybe sometimes still do on our front porch but it will happen much more it's keeping with our current lifestyles.

Judy.: It's interesting to think about that sometimes maybe it's easier two approach someone you don't know online with an E mail then actually walk up to the door or put yourself out there to
introduce herself at first. What are you finding Susan as far as the conference is concerned and what you will be talking about?

Susan.: Can be used to help increasing participation and do not leave anyone behind that’s the whole point of course of these technologies is to help us be better informed and helpless connect with each other better. We do not want to leave anyone out.

Judy.: What are some of the examples that you will give for different towns as far as ways to do that?

Susan.: One of the things we do in our town is we actually if there are people who'd like to come to town meeting but can’t because they are unable to physically because their ill or maybe they are in the military. We are going to stream what we have. For years now we stream our town meeting. If you have access to a computer you can watch listen but we've even made it so that you can vote in the voice votes because you can connect by phone as well so you're watching on your computer you're there by phone. It has to be prerearranged we cannot do dozens of people at a time but in small towns. As long as it's a voice vote or hand vote where you can see the person not a paper ballot. You can participate that way. Have there are lots of big and small technologies people can use to improve their engagement.

Judy.: It almost sounds like there's any number of ways you can solve whatever problem has cropped up in the past as far as people not being informed are not being able to go to town meeting. Do you find the front porch forum is more effective in smaller communities than larger communities?

Michael.: Not necessarily it's been successfully used in all sorts of Vermont Communities urban rural suburban big small conservative left wing is not that it works great everywhere there some places where it's still kind of gestating and hasn't quite blossomed yet but in most places again because I think there's a basic need for people to know the people around them and be able to talk easily. We are expanding right now across the state and if anybody or any community I encourage them if they're not sure if front porch forms there they can check online at front porch forum.com and sign up we are already in their town and if we're not we'd like help to come to their town and they can contact us.

Judy.: Excellent. For more information about the e-Vermont and the November 19 conference at Lynden State college. Visit the e-Vermont website it’s before e4VT.org. You can also call the number on your screen (802)-225-6091. Michael and Susan thank you for joining me today. 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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