



Rural Voices Issues Forums Grant Final Report

15 February 2010

A. Progress Toward Project Goals

1. Please restate the goals of your grant.

Promote the voice of rural Minnesotans through the Internet within their local communities...by creating meaningful connections among local people using online tools.

2. What progress have you made toward these goals?

- a. E-Democracy.org with local volunteers helped launch four local Issues Forums in rural Minnesota successfully:
 - Three directly supported by the grant in Bemidji, Cass Lake/Leech Lake, and Cook County
 - The fourth in Grand Rapids in conjunction with KAXE's Northern Community Internet Project
- b. We demonstrated the value of in-person outreach efforts to reach the 100 members required for successful start-up. This included the effective use of paper sign-up sheets to recruit people for an online forum.
- c. We introduced the use of "citizen media" to raise rural voices through our regional in-person citizen media outreach meetings/events in Fergus Falls, Winona, Bemidji, Cass Lake, and Grand Rapids. Attendance varied from 5 to 20. Ironically, the smallest event in Cass Lake/Leech Lake led to the most successful forum launch.
- d. We hosted a citizen media/Issues Forum webinar with over 30 attendees.
 - The slides with audio are available on-demand from: <http://e-democracy.org/webinars>
 - Our updated Issues Forum Guide is available as a work draft from: http://pages.e-democracy.org/Issues_Forum_Guide
- e. We leveraged project outreach to include Issues Forum volunteers in the Blandin-sponsored Minnesota Voices Unconference: <http://e-democracy.org/unconf>
- f. Bemidji and Cass Lake received second site visits in fall 2009 that included volunteer interviews, "information seeking" training, and forum picnics.
- g. Issues Forums are creating meaningful connections that are opening up and influencing the direction of local public life – although it is important to note that these forums are in their early days. As these are designed to last for years at a low actual cost, we expect that future research, and evaluation of the long-term results of this rural expansion and the full Issues Forum network and experience will be extremely useful.

3. Have you made any significant revisions to these goals, and if so, why?

The implementation timeline was extended significantly. This was due to the unforeseen personal leave and then permanent departure of the Issues Forum director who was to lead this project. With Executive Director Steven Clift's time through July 2009 essentially subsidized by his Ashoka Fellowship, months of Issues Forum coaching and operations originally not covered by the grant, added considerable time and overall resources to this initiative.

B. Social Capital: Developing and maintaining relationships that allow us to work together across our differences

1. To what extent has working on this grant helped to develop new relationships/networks or strengthen existing ones?

Building social capital to help strengthen local communities is a primary outcome from local Issues Forum efforts. Creating a 24 x 7 virtual, local, online, public space for a community fundamentally supports the development and deepening of community relationships. We often refer to the model's ability to open up community agenda-setting in public life, but ultimately our forums are creating real-life bonds between people with a common interest in their local community. Over time and with active use they can help strengthen the social fabric of a community.

We help create trusted, sustained communication spaces, but ultimately it is up to the community itself to take the next steps. Through the accumulation of individual statements and actions, they decide whether they use it to "work together" or more likely to vitally, to open up discourse. This encourages the community to take the local pulse on the level of agreement on an issue and see differences yet to be worked out by the broader community through their traditional democratic and community institutions.

The extent to which these online spaces produce bridging or bonding social capital is contingent on a number of factors gleaned from our own experience with these forums and interviews with Forum Manager:

- a. Extent to which community members previously lacked an accessible means to communicate across diverse interests and backgrounds (people often use forums out of necessity more than as the primary or ideal mechanism)
- b. Number of participants recruited: this represents the initial "signal strength" and with each post based on interest level, it ripples out into the community via e-mail forwards, word of mouth, and traditional media mentions, which via a multiplier effect in turn drive visitor web traffic
- c. Topics discussed, including their timeliness related to local decision-making as well as the discovery of new issues that are not on the public agenda or in the local news – but should be
- d. Engagement by those with established power in the community
- e. Whether the forum has experienced a dynamic "we own this" exchange based on the necessity for rapid communication across the community: we have found that the forums where this happens in the first six months are strongest; with some forums, the lack of a "this is great" exchange does not allow the forum to break through people's natural skepticism and typical information-consumer passivity
- f. Online community problem-solving and direct community action where people work together via the forum; this is starting to happen in our urban neighborhood-level forums, but is viewed as a next generation activity that will require significant investment to foster on a wide scale

- g. Frequency of problems with less civil posters who can make the participation environment seem unfriendly to many and reduce efforts by others to redirect the forum to its core mission; this is why most online spaces involving the exchange of political views drive away “everyday” participants in weeks or days when strong partisans impossibly seek to “win” arguments online primarily through name calling and personal attacks; enforcing the forum’s civility rules may also sometimes have a counter effect, in which the lack of information or knowledge about our model leads to accusations of censorship and a confusion about our role as an outside authority, rather than an organization with members expressing their right of assembly under shared terms – which is distinctly different from unaccountable, alias-based forums

Further, in each of our Rural Voices Issues Forum communities we established volunteer “teams” to help draft forum charters, lead outreach, and to support the volunteer Forum Manager. These informal teams are supported by a private online group that allows group communication. This behind-the-scenes networking increases a community’s capacity to experiment with future generations of social media in public life. Whether it is online community journalism or online tools for local problem-solving and taskforces, this team is now a potential resource to help explore related activities if there is sufficient interest or resources.

Forum: Cass Lake Leech Lake – <http://e-democracy.org/cl>

- Forum Manager: Daniel LeClaire
- Opened: September 2008
- Members Today: 186
- Estimated Household Penetration Rate: 12% (186/1491 households - Cass Lake Bena School District territory)
- Total Posts: 644
- Average Monthly Posts: 40
- Average Monthly Authors 2009: 16.5 or c. 9% each month
- Notable Topics: Pipeline, small business development, community mutual benefit and support, organizing for in-person community inauguration party
- Comments: This forum is a big "C" community forum in this majority Native American area. Discussions about the big pipeline from Canada are interspersed with an invitation to a Sloppy Joe fundraiser to help a community member with medical bills. In a YouTube interview (<http://blog.e-democracy.org/posts/509>) Patty Smith notes that based on her participation in the forum she has interacted with more non-Native Americans than any time in the last 11 years since she moved on the reservation. Local forum members organized a number of in-person civic gatherings to build forum interest including an inauguration community event where people were asked to “wear their best blue jeans.” Daniel LeClaire, the forum manager has noted the quality of discussion here is far higher than an anonymous web discussion board (likely the one hosted by Topix.com which creates forums for every postal code with no registration, community leadership, or real name requirement across the country) that was riddled with name calling and conflict. The Cass Lake Times reports numerous times that items from the forum were useful in generating new stories.
- Forum Manager Audio Interview (24 minutes):
<http://e-democracy.org/media/issuesforuminterviewcasslake.mp3>

Forum: Cook County – <http://e-democracy.org/cc>

- Forum Manager: Jim Boyd
- Opened: February 2009
- Members Today: 211
- Estimated Household Penetration Rate: 9% (211/2350 households - Cook County)
- Total Posts: 741
- Ave. Monthly Posts: 67
- Ave. Monthly Authors 2009: 25 or c. 12% each month
- Notable Topics: Broadband referendum questions and answers, septic ordinance proposal, dog kenneling, local renewable energy, ice storm
- Comments: Leveraging years of Boreal Access networking, an invitation went to approximately 3,000 people on their e-mail announcement list and helped attract the 100 participants required to open quickly and strongly. The start-up committee, bolstered by connections to the county government, WTIP public radio, and the Cook County Herald, was able to launch the forum extremely effectively in the "center" of local civic life. This forum sometimes seems like a miniature think tank. WTIP reports taking the septic issue and turning it into an in-studio guest show with public call-ins for an hour. Explorations are underway to encourage forum partners to use the forum more actively such as promoting a story of the week for extended dialogue or inviting those making comments to adapt them into letters to the editor.
- Forum Manager Audio Interview (50 minutes):
<http://e-democracy.org/media/issuesforuminterviewcookcounty.mp3>

Forum: Bemidji - <http://e-democracy.org/bemidji>

- Forum Manager: Jeff Ueland
- Opened: January 2009
- Members Today: 129
- Estimated Household Penetration Rate: Believed to be low, but unknown due to broadly defined service area
- Total Posts: 468
- Average Monthly Posts: 39
- Average Monthly Authors 2009: 16 or 12.4% each month
- Notable Topics: Bemidji Regional Events Center (BREC), chicken permits within city, Native American job opportunities in government, and BREC center construction
- Comments: Bemidji, a regional center like Grand Rapids but with a larger population, opened with the controversial issue of public funding for the Bemidji Regional Events Center. After a friendly round of introductions, having a divisive community issue emerge immediately before leaders in the community could experience the positive values of an open discussion on local public issues reduced their involvement to simply monitoring the forum. While divisive issues will always emerge, a forum with a few months of general exchange can more quickly demonstrate its overall civic value to those who will naturally feel challenged when the forum is used to demonstrate strong opposition.

The local city government also appears to take a very conservative approach online by not providing or posting email addresses of city council members (their other local government

bodies provide direct email addresses of elected officials). This means that if a council member participates, she or he may feel individually exposed online much differently than when they meet in person at City Hall. See the Lessons Learned section for related information about perceived barriers from open meeting and similar laws. That said, the forum has generally recovered, with active community members regularly using the forum to announce BREC construction job opportunities.

The chicken permit issue demonstrated clearly how a forum like this can be used, in this case younger adults, to seek advice on how to engage the City Council. The forum was also the first source of public conversation, which was later picked up local media. Finally, on this issue the posters also used photos in their attempt to maintain their in-city chicken raising permit. This forum would benefit from a round of additional outreach with a goal of 200 members.

- Forum Manager Audio Interview (21 minutes):
<http://e-democracy.org/media/issuesforuminterviewbemidji.mp3>

Forum: Grand Rapids Issues Forum – <http://e-democracy.org/gr>

While not officially part of this grant, it is appropriate to report on this here due to indirect Blandin Foundation funding of \$5,000 via KAXE radio station, which helped support the more basic launch of this forum. While this amount is less than that spent on the other forums, it does not include the time and effort of the Northern Community Internet Project.

- Forum Manager: Tarry Edington
- Opened: July 2009
- Members Today: 109
- Estimated Household Penetration Rate: Believed to be low, but unknown due to broadly defined service area
- Total Posts: 158
- Average Monthly Authors 2009: 12 or 12%
- Notable Topics: Transportation policy, airport cost sharing
- Comments: This forum is clearly slow “out of the gate.” The forum had a last-minute change in Forum Manager upon its opening, which limited the amount of training and support received by the new volunteer. It was also requested by leaders in the local committee to limit activities that might give the impression this was an effort being imposed from “the (Twin) Cities.”

When the forum opened, an activist from a neighboring county pushing the envelope of locality. This created the most confrontational environment we’ve experienced during a forum start-up in our 25-forum history. Threats of legal action (likely unfounded) led to this person’s temporary suspension, and after the worst case of e-mail harvesting and spamming in E-Democracy.org’s history, led to an indefinite suspension.

While most online forums would not have survived this combination of factors (participants normally leave), the forum is slowly building its use and relevance in the community due to the steady hand of local volunteers including the Forum Manager. To fully realize its potential it requires a second recruitment drive to double its size to at least 200 members. This drive would be most effective with posters recruiting people from around the community and in-person sign-up recruiting at community events.

Recently, Becky LaPlant with the Blandin Foundation demonstrated the “flip the switch” potential of the forum to generate quick feedback on the region’s transportation system; see <http://forums.e-democracy.org/r/topic/7CqfEQsRwfJKXOWaygLfqW> for more information. We strongly encourage the use of forums for such special events, as well as community question and answer sessions with guest speakers. The more this community public space asset is used with intent, the greater its value will be.

To contrast the notable topics on these forums with others across our network, see our regular e-newsletter’s “Around the Forums” section at <http://blog.e-democracy.org/?s=%22Around+the+Forums%22>.

2. What effect has this had on the project’s ability to overcome differences and achieve its goals?

The starting point for a community to overcome differences is an open and extended articulation of views and differences. Political exchange general thoughts and the human nature fueled by the veil of the Internet support people note their disagreements with greater frequency. This is why without strict civility rules and real name accountability, online commentary on local media websites rarely reaches above diatribe and name calling.

While highly structured public participation processes with professional facilitators can create deep opportunities for community members to overcome differences and reach agreement on a specific community priority, our goal is different. With these forums we are trying to create sustained engagement opportunities that can run themselves on volunteer capacity, and where people respectfully exchange information and views about public issues that are important to people in that community. We have achieved that simple but critically important goal.

Our challenges are to maintain quality and improve the experience, encourage new voices from across the spectrum of diversity, and demonstrate that those with power and influence in the community (elected and appointed officials, recognized community leaders, journalists, etc.) are paying attention and are willing to engage the community via online dialogues. We must also work to defend these online public spaces against the rare individual who seeks to participate outside the defined civility framework. We are well aware that these forums are always just one unchecked conflict among a few members from losing credibility in a community.

C. Framing: Crafting an effective action plan based on research and the inclusion of a variety of perspectives

1. What research was performed to help put your plan together?

The Issues Forum model is well researched but primarily tested in urban environments. See <http://e-democracy.org/if> and <http://e-democracy.org/research>.

The extension to a smaller town environment presents new considerations, including the following:

- The extent to which the forum complements the local media, or is viewed by them as competition (noting that the local papers in Bemidji and Grand Rapids seem less engaged than in the other two communities) or fills a perceived void in opportunities for community engagement in local public life

- The reality that in smaller communities people are far more familiar with each other, making it more likely that what you say online will affect your day-to-day relationships with people in your community; as someone once said to us, in a small town, if you express your political views online and anger the guy who changes your oil, he might not change your oil anymore!

In terms of citizen media research, we did extensive online outreach in tandem with the Minnesota Voices Unconference to discover dozens of examples of citizen media to raise rural voices across Greater Minnesota. These examples were integrated into the initial outreach and education phase. See <http://delicious.com/tag/mnvoices>.

2. Describe the types of community perspectives that were sought out and included in the preparation of your plan?

We convened a Rural Voices virtual working group that started with one-on-one telephone conversations to gather preliminary input from organizations active across rural Minnesota. This group was used primarily in the initial regional citizen media outreach phase to help prospect communities for training events. While many were interested our efforts, due to the groundbreaking nature of this work, the actual input was limited. This did serve a check and balance function, however -- had we been completely unreasonable with our plans, these advisers would have warned us.

In each Issues Forum community, a small, informal, start-up committee was formed with each member providing their own perspective and community connections. After participants decided they wanted to try this model in their own community, a volunteer Forum Manager was identified to move the forum forward. The forum scope and charter drafting process, where broad input is invited, helps ensure community ownership of the newly created online public space.

Northern Community Internet played a vital role in community outreach assistance. We leveraged their existing convening activities around online citizen journalism, and they dedicated their own resources to help with forum recruitment. They saw Issues Forums as an extremely cost-effective precursor to the more labor-intensive work of citizen journalism, and we saw it as a great partnership. Issues Forums are also likely to remain active even with fluctuating motivation or resources to generate news.

3. How have these perspectives and research influenced the effectiveness of your plan?

Our existing Guidebook, <http://e-democracy.org/if>, and project-funded training presentation is available as a multimedia webinar with "how to" advice, and citizen media research is available on demand at <http://e-democracy.org/webinars>. This is crucial to provide effective support to Forum Managers who are the cornerstones of our civility-based model.

Input from our participants and local volunteers has continually helped shape the technology improvements. While we know how important it is to maintain e-mail publishing for these community forums in order to include more voices and those with slower Internet connections, our design needed to be improved to create stronger first impressions. This grant supported including YouTube videos and auto-resizing of photos to improve the display. The final improvements recently implemented display the latest activity across the forums - including photos shared, latest contributors, etc. showing the dynamic activity via the web to potential new members and visitors.

D. Mobilization: Contributions of both financial and non-financial resources toward your objectives

1. In addition to Blandin Foundation funding, what other financial and non-financial resources (e.g., volunteer time, facilities, etc.) have been contributed to advance the project's work?

Local volunteers are central to this initiative. We estimate that roughly 90% of the effort required is being covered by our volunteers – particularly our Forum Managers. Participants themselves are also contributing their time as they read what others in their community have to say and post to the forums themselves.

In addition to the Northern Community Internet assistance and media partnerships, all the outreach events we hosted were in donated space, from the Winona City Hall to the Leech Lake Tribal College.

The grant successfully leveraged Steven Clift's Ashoka Fellowship which allowed him to provide extensive in-kind hours to this effort. This doubled the real-time value of \$49,000 originally contributed by the Blandin Foundation.

In terms of actual funding, this grant *leveraged* a \$25,000 grant from the Minneapolis Foundation to support new neighborhood-level Issues Forums in two high-immigrant neighborhoods in the Twin Cities. The technology budget for both of these grants was matched two-to-one to secure an additional \$8,000 Ashoka technical assistance grant that was used to improve the open-source platform we use to host these Issues Forums.

The \$1,000 reallocated toward the grant-writing match (with permission from the Blandin Foundation) contributed in part to our success grant with Ford Foundation for \$150,000 in October 2009 for our next generation online civic engagement, "Participation 3.0." The Ford Foundation has expressed interest in lessons emerging from the Cass Lake Leech Lake forum that might be shared with other lower-income, highly diverse communities.

2. Are these resources sufficient to achieve the desired outcome?

Due to the extended time frame, our desired outcomes have advanced as well. The promise was a sustained, online, public space driven by its members. While all forums remain active, the "what's next, what can we do better" question is before us.

While sustained facilitation can be supported by one volunteer Forum Manager with minimal "home office" support, developing further volunteer roles and building local teams with outreach, content, or other goals goes well beyond the original goals and scope.

As indicated in our detailed "deepen phase" proposal, field outreach beyond that which can be expected of volunteers, as well as further development of volunteer roles and the local team is required to take these forums to the next level.

The role of the local Forum Manager is crucial and their active seeding of content and discussion topics is the primary determinate of forum activity levels. Our model of low-cost e-mail as the default delivery mechanism means a forum remains an asset for quick community use when required. However, the local team's capacity to generate periodic membership outreach and establish new volunteer roles beyond that

of the Forum Manager is not well established in these communities. If funding for community capacity-building can be secured, it would help take our model to the next level in these rural communities. It would be an opportunity for the Rural Voices communities to contribute back to the 15-community network from which they benefited as they came into being.

E. Healthy Community Indicators

This project was most closely associated with the Blandin Foundation's "rural voices" strategy. It also clearly contributed to leadership development as well as intercultural competencies, particularly in Bemidji and the Cass Lake area.

- The forums are squarely "new communication channels that give voice to rural perspectives"
- They reach people directly and often on a daily basis; see statistics under Social Capital and comments about "signal strength"
- The Cass Lake Leech Lake and Cook County forums are generating regular media impact – which we find essential to fully democratizing the value of the exchange to the broader community; examples include press coverage of in-person community town meetings. As noted, the media in the other communities seems less engaged even though reporters do appear to monitor the forum. Ideally, stories that are generated from the forum would fully credit the forum as the source and include a link so that more community members can find the forums.

F. Lessons Learned

1. What lessons have you drawn? What helped or hindered your efforts?

Many of our lessons are interspersed above. Below are a few additional reflections:

- Support for the local Forum Manager is what matters most. Local committees mostly function as start-up teams. The resources to establish them as something more like "service clubs" are more effort than is required for a basic start-up. We are streamlining our model to allow just one person to take charge of this idea locally while focusing the local team on start-up. This new approach is detailed here. While we would like to invest in full local committee activities, during these economic times we do not see the support emerging for that level of effort.
- The tepid response from rural elected officials is the most dramatic difference from our urban experience. Grey-area questions generated by general legal advisories provided by the League of Cities (<https://www.lmnc.org/media/document/1/electroniccommunications.pdf>) are likely part of the cause. Such commentaries lump public online forums with private group e-mail communications, and suggest the exposure of even one elected official's interactions with the public to a quorum of members could violate the state Open Meeting Law. With future launches, we recommend making brief presentations to elected bodies and encouraging resolutions that support such online efforts in their community. At various times our forums have been linked to by local government websites and in one case a forum start-up with directly sponsored by a city government as part of its community visioning effort; those kinds of connections should be sought again.
- While not specific to this project, we remain bullish on the value of Issues Forums hosted by E-Democracy.org, but are considering ways to better train and educate others on how to adapt our lessons and techniques to build other types of forums in their own communities.

To further our mission, we are exploring a relationship with the <http://GroupsNearYou.com> site

hosted by mySociety.org to promote local online communities, as well as hosting a peer-to-peer learning space for all local forum managers (<http://forums.e-democracy.org/groups/localsonline>).

If 90% of the actual cost of Issues Forums is covered through volunteer capacity, the continued necessary subsidy of the other 10% for 25+ forums across 15 communities must be addressed before we can expand aggressively to new communities. We do not yet have the capital required to experiment with business models that generate sufficient revenue, even \$5 per participant per year, through sponsorship, advertising, or participant donations.

We are experimenting with a volunteer-built service called Neighborly, at <http://e-democracy.org/neighborly>, which would allow people to connect privately in small groups with those who live nearest them. We see this working in rural areas as well. This service would connect people into public issues forums where they exist, but going to scale would require a path for local sponsorship and advertising combined with the ability to serve people without needing volunteer teams to get started (you could support them later).

2. If you were to do things over, what would you do differently?

- Noting the loss of our original project leader and the scarcity of those with the required online skills and experiences to lead this effort, a staffing back-up plan that anticipated the potential loss of project talent would have sped up project execution.
- In terms of field outreach, both a major poster campaign and specific goals around paper sign-ups would have helped Bemidji and Grand Rapids in particular.
- Additional funding for local outreach contractors could dramatically increase the number of members. Informed by this summer's in-person outreach in St. Paul's Frogtown neighborhood, such contracts could include setting up recruitment tables at key public events, the library, local gathering places, and so on; see the newly updated templates at <http://blog.e-democracy.org/posts/639>.