

Expanding Rural Voices through Online Citizen Engagement and Citizen Media

PROPOSAL SUBMITTED TO BLANDIN FOUNDATION - June 13, 2007

Submitted by E-Democracy.Org, Steven Clift, Board Chair, 612-822-8667, team@e-democracy.org

Minnesotans are proud of their tradition of civic engagement from the local level up. As broadband reaches into rural Minnesota, we have the opportunity to create meaningful connections among local people using online tools. Yes, connecting online to the entire world is important, but 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 by laying the foundation for a statewide voice.

The two primary goals of this 18-month initiative are to:

1. Share emerging lessons from online citizen engagement and media. This will promote grassroots 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: Collaboratively design and implement five citizen media and online engagement events/trainings across rural Minnesota to introduce opportunities, build skills and capacity, and discover leaders.

We must leverage the individualized "MySpace" experience in private life and turn it 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. Many of these tools add public elements to private expressions, but 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**.

Working collaboratively with our outreach partners, we will design and implement a series of public events and trainings in up to five regions across rural Minnesota. The bulk of this will be done in the first six months of the project. These will be in or near 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 visiting or presenting to local government staff or elected officials, schools, or at service clubs, 4H, Chamber of Commerce, etc., or simply interviewing a local rural blogger to capture their tips and lessons.

The presentations will engage area experts when available and may include topics such as the following:

- “Citizen” and Community Life Blogging
- Digital photography, including 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 and others
- Online Civic Events and Town Hall meetings
- 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 we also envision additional small group hands-on training as part of a visit.

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

In areas where the local spark lights a fire, the second step is to connect these often isolated individual or institutional efforts into community-wide online experiences. 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. And we build sustainability into our work based on realistic volunteer capacity, resources, and attention to ongoing costs.

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 eight local e-democracy initiatives across three 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 5-10 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” of 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 help set up Issues Forums (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(c)3 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 attract 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 “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 “Neighborhoods Online Forums” grant for efforts in one or two neighborhoods with a high concentration of immigrant/low income/communities of color areas was recently approved for \$25,000 by the MSNet fund of the Minneapolis Foundation and will mutually 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, KAXE, among other key "outreach partners". See Appendix B.

The proposed selection criteria used by E-Democracy.Org to select the three pilot communities for Issues Forums is:

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 in building from the core Issues Forum to include additional citizen media concepts.
4. Overall mixture of communities selected, considering geographic distribution, type (highly rural area, regional center, small town, etc.), and so on.
5. A local commitment 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 should be explored to establish local e-democracy/ citizen media efforts in communities with greater need but less capacity.

Proposed Budget

18 Month Project Budget Total: \$49,000

Outreach and Training Sessions – Phase 1: \$10,000

- **Five Major Outreach and Training Events:** Extensive coordination, promotion, and communication as 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 web viewing.
- **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 expenses.

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

- **Initial Issues Forum Outreach:** This 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 mentor new local volunteer Forum Managers in rural Minnesota for one year.
- **Recruitment and Local Outreach:** Outreach materials and public events will be developed to help local committees launch their local e-democracy and citizen media efforts.

Technology Hosting and Enhancements: \$5,100

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 will 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, including YouTube video, Flickr photos, Del.icio.us links, and Upcoming event calendars. Aggregation is essential to display locally relevant content (sometimes called a “mash-up”) alongside the content generated with our own hosted technology (GroupServer, WordPress). This allows cost-effective integration of multimedia and the presentation of a dynamic community homepage with content from multiple sources.
- **Training Session Equipment Costs:** If these arise, we will use donated computer labs and equipment to the greatest extent possible.

Project Coordination: \$4,000

- Teleconferencing
- Fiscal management
- *Note that this proposal leverages the management capacity supported by Steven Clift's Ashoka Fellowship*

Research and Evaluation: \$4,900

- Participant survey to access:
 - The impact of project in engaging citizens in communities through
 - Online interactions with each other
 - Increased familiarity with local government, nonprofit, and media partners
 - Face-to-face connections to build the local online community
 - The impact of project on civic involvement in public issues
 - Tangible outcomes of local legislation, policies, nonprofit contributions or spending, contribution by citizens to one or many media outlets or citizen media efforts
- Video, audio, and print materials for community media outlets (such as community radio, access television) making other communities aware of project resources and impacts.
- Organize gathered and developed resources into Internet available resource to facilitate graduate student or similar research projects

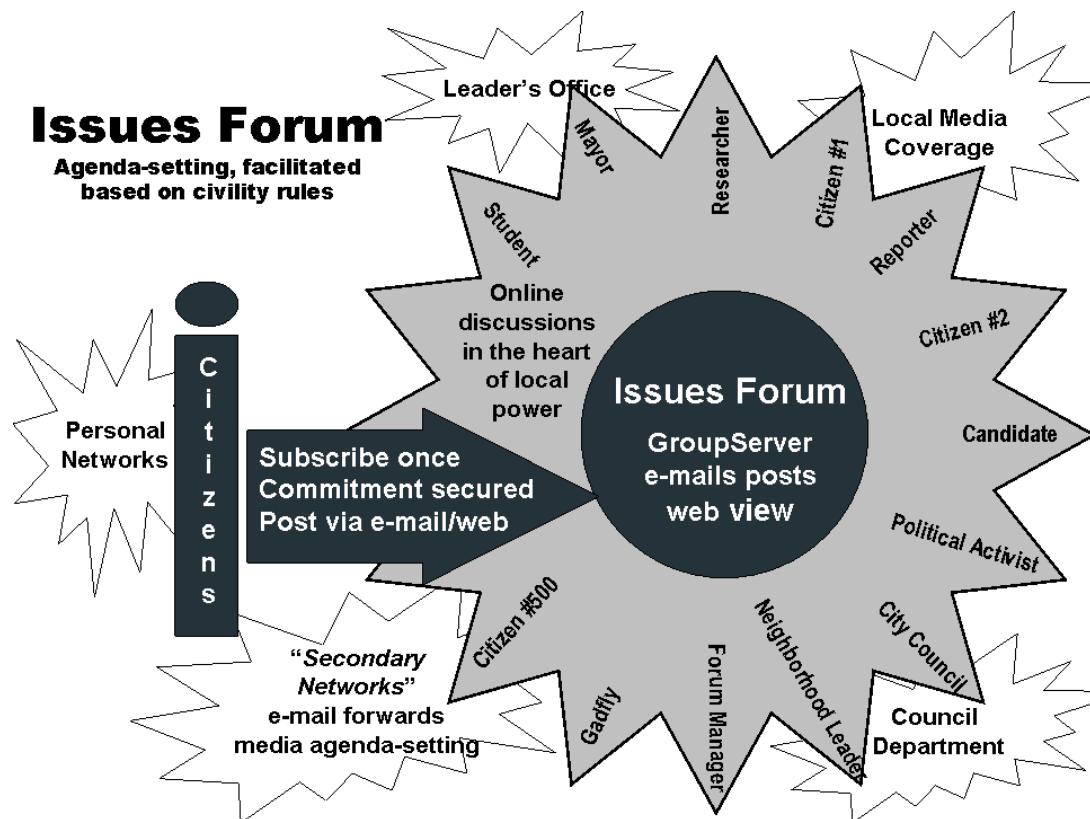
Appendix A: Local Issues Forums

Why Join? What is a Local Issues Forum?

This is an excerpt from our guide (PDF): <http://e-democracy.org/if>

Simply put, a Local Issues Forum is an online public commons (or town hall meeting), where any community member, 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 Community Members 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 Community Member 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 and 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

Video Introduction

A short six minute video interview about Issues Forums from public television is available from:

<http://e-democracy.org/if>

Appendix B: Outreach Partners

Outreach partners will be invited to shape the training content and be provided free tickets/invitations to each of the regional presentations/trainings for distribution.

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 - mmontgomery@kaxe.org
- Minnesota Journalism Center, U of M – <http://www.mjc.umn.edu> - Kathleen Hansen, k-hans@umn.edu
- Institute for New Media Studies, U of M – <http://www.inms.umn.edu> - Nora Paul, n paul@umn.edu
- MNSCU - <http://www.mnonline.project.mnscu.edu> – Paul Wasko, Minnesota Online e-Services Director, 651-649-5956, paul.wasko@so.mnscu.edu

Proposed list for possible participation – to be contacted:

- Minnesota Public Radio – <http://www.mpr.org> (interested, confirmation required)
- 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>
- AMPERS - Association of MN 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, Harry Boyte
- 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>
- MN Chamber of Commerce (locals 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 (use wikis for planning)
- Ctr for Advocacy and Political Leadership, U of M Duluth - <http://www.d.umn.edu/~maplwww/>