



Vermont Council on Rural Development

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## Front Porch Forum to go statewide

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By Neal Goswami

MONTPELIER ? An online forum allowing local communities to share information or seek and offer assistance to neighbors is set for a statewide rollout with backing from the Vermont Council on Rural Development.

Front Porch Forum, which launched in Burlington in 2006 before spreading throughout Chittenden County, is now available to all 251 towns in Vermont, according to co-founder Michael Wood-Lewis.

?We've grown steadily outward across about half of Vermont,? he said. ?Now, as of Sept. 1 we're available on the other half of the state as well.?

Each town or neighborhood site is moderated by ?professional online community managers,? and members are clearly identified when sharing postings, according to Wood-Lewis. Each forum allows members to share information quickly and with ease, seek help finding lost pets, provide information about local events and debate local issues.

?Our business is to help neighbors connect and to build community. They do that by going online and sharing simple messages with clearly identified neighbors,? he said. ?Some people have described it as Craigslist meets Yelp meets Angie?s List meets Groupon.?

Wood-Lewis and his wife, Valerie, developed the site from a precursor after the couple moved to the city in 2000 and sought a way to meet neighbors. More than half the households in Burlington are now members, and the service quickly spread throughout Chittenden County, he said.

Front Porch Forum has focused on expanding the service for the last six months. In February, there were 47,000 active members across 90 Vermont towns covering about half the state. Now it is available statewide in every town, with 57,000 members. New members are signing up by the hundreds each week, Wood-Lewis said.

?People, ultimately, are getting a great response to items they post ? mostly because it?s nearby,? he said. ?What?s exciting for us is that people tend to join because they're looking for

local results. They stay on because after months of using it they're more connected, they feel dialed in.?

Much of the rapid expansion was made possible after the Vermont Council on Rural Development noticed how effective the site was in the aftermath of several natural disasters, according to Wood-Lewis.

?What we saw coming out of all the terrible challenges associated with Tropical Storm Irene and the 2011 Lake Champlain flooding was that people used Front Porch Forum along with other tools during the crisis and after the crisis. VCRD noted that and wanted all communities to have that support mechanism for the next crisis that comes down the pike,? he said.

Anecdotal evidence suggested that communities that had a pre-existing forum were able to bounce back faster from the flooding, according to Wood-Lewis. ?When disaster hits ? if you've got a lot of social capital you're stronger in the face of calamity,? he said.

The Vermont Council on Rural Development, a nonprofit that works to support the state's rural communities, secured a disaster relief grant from the federal Economic Development Administration to create online forums across the state as part of its Vermont Digital Economy Project, according to Sharon Combes-Farr, the project director. A total of \$1.8 million was secured with the assistance of Vermont's congressional delegation.

Combes-Farr said the council's executive director, Paul Costello, noticed the impact the forums were having on local communities as he traveled the state. Tropical Storm Irene highlighted how Front Porch Forum was boosting communities, she said.

?We see a real value of having every town on the same platform,? Combes-Farr said. ?We have the ability to put messages and information across all of those forums where people are used to getting information. We see great potential in disaster situations.?

Front Porch Forum was selected through a competitive bid process to be the vendor that supplied a statewide service. Wood-Lewis said the company's customized software and existing infrastructure was a good fit.

?They were looking for a service pretty much like ours, and we're fairly unique out there,? he said.

The grant money must be expended by the end of next summer. Combes-Farr said the grant is serving as an investment to provide the service free to the entire state. When the grant money is gone Wood-Lewis can maintain the site through advertising and sponsors, she said.

?We're just basically giving a boost,? she said.

The online forums in new towns and neighborhoods will start in ?registration? mode and will become fully functional when at least 100 residents sign up, Wood-Lewis said.

New users can go to [frontporchforum.com](http://frontporchforum.com) and enter their street address to be directed to their

local site.

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