

Grand Isle awarded e-Vermont grant

NORTH HERO — Residents of the Champlain Islands, traditionally isolated from the mainland, this month opted for e-connectivity upgrades.

Grand Isle County is one of 12 relatively isolated areas that received grants to improve Internet applications in schools, municipal and civic networks and in commerce. The money is not used to bring broadband to the community, rather it teaches residents to make better use of the Internet.

It holds the promise of a great leap forward, said Ruth Wallman, executive director of the Lake Champlain Islands Chamber of Commerce.

“Better Web-based marketing for small businesses, making the Islands a destination for more small businesses — people are just eating it up,” she said Wednesday.

Wallman, who wrote much of the grant application, said the county’s “accident of geography” always has fostered vibrant communication among residents. That heritage galvanized efforts to bring in expert advice.

Grand Isle’s grassrootsfired application for the e-Vermont program was “heroic,” said Paul Costello, the executive director of the Vermont Council for Rural Development, the Montpelier-based nonprofit that administers the grant.

The goal: to kick-start new approaches to four-season tourism, long-distance learning and improved citizen participation in government.

Every fourth- or fifthgrader can look forward to the exclusive use of a netbook computer, which the student will be able to take home.

About \$2.5 million in federal stimulus funds supports e-Vermont projects statewide;

nonprofits, charitable foundations and corporations provide a \$1.3 million match. Because much of the grant is administered through technical advisors, specific dollar amounts for each community are not available.

Within several years, the project aims to stimulate local economies, modernize school curricula and staff training, and promote better municipal and civic websites. Over the longer run, Costello said, corporate sponsors of the project (Comcast, Dell and Microsoft) hope to see increased adoption rates for Internet service — which might eventually translate into more timely service and equipment upgrades.

Nonprofit sponsors include the Jan and David Blittersdorf Foundation, the Evslin Family Foundation, the University of Vermont’s Center for Rural Studies, the Vermont Rural Partnership and the Vermont Community Foundation.

Word spread quickly when the e-Vermont grant was announced in April — and the call to action wasn’t far behind, said Sharon Hayes, the school librarian at South Hero Community Library.

“I got on the e-mail; other people got on the horn,” she said. “Everybody came together, and quickly.”

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“We do it all the time,” she continued.
“Collaboration is just a natural thing over here.
We just do it.”

Incoming Folsom Elementary School Principal Diane Lemieux said she encountered ample momentum for the project during early April meetings at her adopted district. Lemieux, until July an associate principal and tech coordinator in the Franklin Central Supervisory Union (and instructor in 21st-century education at St. Michael’s College in Colchester), found time to co-write Grand Isle’s grant application.

New connections are important, she said.

“Teachers will change the way they teach, but the content will remain intact,” she continued. “Students still need to learn how to write; they still need to do math. The difference will be in opportunities of finding information, in discovering new tools and new ways of collaborating.”

The dozen grant-winning communities (selected from more than 40 applicants) are Brighton, Bristol, Canaan, Cambridge, Grand Isle County, Ludlow, Middlesex, Newport, Poultney, Pownal, Sunderland and West Rutland.

Learn more about e-Vermont projects online at the Vermont Council on Rural Development: www.vtrural.org.

Contact Joel Banner Baird at 660-1843 or joelbaird@burlingtonfreepress.com. Read his blog at www.burlingtonfreepress.com/BairdsEyeView and follow him on Twitter at [@vtgoingup](https://twitter.com/vtgoingup).

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