



# Community Connection

The Knight Center of Digital Excellence Newsletter

April 13, 2009



## Connect to broadband Internet and reconnect your community



**By Karen Archer Perry, the Knight Center of Digital Excellence**

In his book “Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community,” Harvard scholar Robert Putnam pointed to ways Americans had become less connected – to one another and to their communities – over the second half of the last century.

Now, the promise of federal stimulus money presents a historic opportunity for communities to come together in old-fashioned, roundtable discussions to talk about how technology and innovation can change the future of community life.

Our team leaders at the Knight Center of Digital Excellence are seeing it firsthand. There is a spark – an energy – emerging in town discussions in communities across America. Through the federal stimulus plan, we have unprecedented investment capabilities. As people in communities come together to talk about new possibilities, they understand that broadband – and the high-speed communication it enables – is critical to succeeding in the new economy. The stimulus is driving communities to make a plan, and once they do, momentum can build for bold, catalytic projects.

In rural Aberdeen, S.D., for example, 100 civic leaders turned out for a series of meetings to discuss how digital initiatives might advance Aberdeen and the area surrounding this hub city. Among several initiatives, an economic development organization called Absolutely Aberdeen is considering a virtual art venue so local artists can sell their work online – anytime, anywhere.

You’ll find the same kind of community engagement in Detroit, where schools, universities, philanthropic groups and others see an opportunity to transform their city through improved public safety, job programs, healthcare and education.

And in Lexington, Ky.: Those who attend the 2010 World Equestrian Games will keep touch with the races, transportation services and much more through Internet communications possible with broadband.

The promise for all of us is that we will be able to connect to each other and to our communities in new and innovative ways. In addition, we can connect our businesses and our goods to world markets – even in places such as northeast South Dakota.

The ability to implement technology to connect communities has been there. What has been lacking is a shared will and sustainable business model. Now the stimulus money can give communities the incentive to develop sustainable new enterprises.

The excitement in Detroit, Lexington and Aberdeen – and in many other places such as Miami, Fla.; Akron, Ohio; Milledgeville, Ga.; St. Paul, Minn.; and Biloxi, Miss. – emerges out of the real possibility for community transformation. The progress so far also demonstrates why it is critical that decision making for broadband networks remain local. Communities need the ability to tie new and expanded broadband networks to community programs and to specific local goals and objectives.

Amid the onslaught of proposals vying for stimulus dollars, it is imperative that funding agencies listen to the civic-minded voices in our communities. It's through community efforts that we will find a return on investment that reaches far beyond broadband technologies – a return that reaches into schools, families and local businesses while strengthening the fabric and future of communities.

Bowling alone? I don't think so.

We're better when we team up, in the places where we live, to harness the power of our collective strength.

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