

Community Infrastructure Builders - The Online Bridge to Somewhere

*An innovative "shovel ready" option for the U.S. economic stimulus - Discussion draft by Steven Clift
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A bridge is infrastructure designed to connect people to each other for social and economic growth. **Digital bridges** can do the same for a fraction of the cost.

Across the United States, a quiet revolution is connecting some local people to one another online. Let's make it most people. Americans are using technology to:

- Create electronic block clubs to deter crime and keep their children safer.
- Establish online neighborhood and community forums, blogs, and social networks that promote community problem-solving, support for local small business and are beginning to be used for mutual benefit and support during these difficult economic times.
- Promote reuse of goods and materials through open exchange primarily at a regional level.
- Promote awareness of volunteer opportunities in local community and non-profit groups.
- Connect the public to local government services through e-mail newsletters, customized alert services, and other online systems.

This highly distributed local activity, particularly at the highly empowering block and neighborhood level, is only reaching a fraction of the population that would benefit from and be interested in such opportunities. It is not just a matter of awareness, it is the lack of thorough on-the-ground outreach required to connect millions of Americans "locally" on the global Internet. It is about the civic use of information technology to complement the many efforts focused on access.

The **Community Infrastructure Builders** effort is a "digital shovel ready" proposal that can be rolled out rapidly to:

1. 30,000 Jobs - Promote the necessarily distributed array of existing online opportunities in local communities directly to local residents by creating approximately 30,000 outreach "for results" jobs - approximately one for each standard Zip Code based on place in the United States.

2. Effective In-Person Outreach - "Bridge" people locally online built on essential in-person outreach. Based on E-Democracy.Org's direct experience with online recruitment in low income areas, rural communities, etc., the primary and missing activity is in-person outreach. Online advertising, etc. only allows you to effectively reach those who are essentially looking for what you are providing. That is not how you build new community bonds. This effort will include outreach at community events, door-to-door, building to building, and more using a mix of paper and technology-based forms for opt-in engagement. Online white pages do not exist that allow you to look-up and easily invite your neighbors to join an e-block club electronically nor for local government to build opt-in participation in cost-effective online public services. With training and the support of local host organizations (libraries, community technology centers, local governments, non-profits, colleges, etc.) where available, the results will be

measured by the percentage of residents/households that opt-in to various local online options and crucially, the creation of new online groups/e-news services fostered or organized by our Community Infrastructure Builders.

3. Collaborative Approach, Multiple Providers - Work with community organizations and local governments to build digitally connective opportunities through collaborative online technology development, effective training, and model transfer as well as exposure to competing providers and services. Hundreds if not thousands of existing, often local, online services will be promoted instead of one single monolithic online service.

4. Promote Lasting Connections - Promote lasting economic stimulus by promoting greater efficiency in local government and community group communication with the public. Make every block potentially safer through neighbor to neighbor connections despite the crisis in resources for policing. Encourage every neighborhood and community to have an online public space that promotes effective "anytime, anywhere" participation in public life to combat the scarcity of time available.

5. Jobs in the Community - Depending upon the stimulus budget, a significant number of these positions would be designed for as summer work for students as well as part-time contract work for retirees needing to re-enter the workforce for economic reasons. The best candidates will be those with both a deep interest in their local community and an ability to work where a significant portion of their compensation is based on their recruitment results.

Real People, Real Results

The following goals would result in at least 100 million Americans signed up in at least one of these areas within two years with an average of 100 group messages/e-alerts received per year per person or 10 billion "bridging" public communication opportunities each year into the future.

- 1.5 million electronic block clubs - ~50 in each standard Zip Code reaching at an average 25 residents each or 37.5 million Americans (these will be secure resident-only online spaces)
- 150,000 new or assisted online neighborhood/community forums - ~5 in each Zipcode (rural areas would likely have just one) reaching an average 300 registered participants reaching 45 million Americans (mostly public, open spaces)
- A least 75 million Americans "opted-in" to online services and alerts provided by local government including crime alerts, city e-mail newsletters, schools e-alerts and more. This will build the existing base already established by adding a "tell me more" check box option about additional e-services from local government and community groups to our outreach paper forms and websites

Stimulus Budget

The local in-person approach is the most effective way to reach harder to reach populations. It can be complemented by Internet-wide outreach efforts through national partners where upon entering geographic information, the public would be offered an array of civic and government online groups, e-mail newsletters, and local links. The key outcome is a "Yes, tell me what's new" or "I want to engage my neighbors, sign me up" and not a simple transitory web visit where no sustained relationship was established.

To create 30,000 jobs, with most deployed starting in the summer of 2009, this will take real resources. These positions are "bridging" in nature through the deepest part of our recession and will lead in many cases to future work opportunities after the bulk of outreach work is completed. As a crucial one-time investment, community organization and local governments will save millions in communication and service costs over the long-run.

Estimated cost - based on an estimated \$30,000 per position including the supporting management, training, and technology costs to create 30,000 field positions the total budget required is: **\$900 million**

Similar results are obtainable under various models and timelines, but the social equity aspect does require in-person outreach to be most effective. With the right national online partners and pro-bono contribution by major web sites, millions of American could be driven to a national online starting point offering local options for a lower cost and allow a greater in-person outreach focus in the most economically depressed areas. As a draft for discussion, if anyone with any insider power or influence in the new administration wants to adopt this idea at 10%, even 1% of the proposed budget, let's get connected.

Discuss

To discuss this proposal or share your own for the Obama transition team and Congress, join the non-partisan U.S. Democracy Online Exchange: <http://dowire.org/us>

About the Author

Steven Clift is the founder of E-Democracy.Org which created the world's first election information website in 1994. Today E-Democracy.Org hosts 25 community and neighborhood "Issues Forums" across 15 communities. He has spoken on democracy, community, and government on the Internet across 27 countries and is recognized as an Ashoka Fellow for his socially entrepreneurial efforts. He experiences what every neighborhood should have on the online neighborhood forum - <http://e-democracy.org/se> - that he hosts and is involved in efforts to open similar forums in higher immigrant areas of Minneapolis and St. Paul - <http://blog.e-democracy.org/posts/172> . More from: <http://stevenclift.com> or e-mail clift@publicus.net