Minnesota Intelligent Rural Communities initiative

Summary
The Minnesota Intelligent Rural Communities (MIRC) project is a multi-sector, comprehensive approach to rural Minnesota broadband adoption that targets residents, small businesses, local governments and critical services providers.

The MIRC coalition, comprised of 30 statewide, regional and local partners, formed in summer 2009. Blandin Foundation applied for a federal stimulus grant on behalf of MIRC in August 2009 -- Minnesota's only application with statewide focus. The National Telecommunications and Information Administration awarded MIRC a $4.8 million Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP) grant -- a program of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act -- in March 2010, one of only 44 sustainable adoption grants awarded nationwide. MIRC-related work is scheduled for completion by spring 2013.

Project partners provided $1.5 million in matching funds, for a total project budget of $6.3 million.

Purpose/goal
MIRC aims to support and encourage rural Minnesota communities' efforts to compete and thrive in the broadband economy by focusing on community-based work in sustainable broadband adoption, job growth and wealth creation.

MIRC partner work is designed to reach each of Minnesota's 80 rural counties through education, training, technical assistance, and by removing barriers to broadband adoption. The project is on target to accomplish its goals of reducing the gap between rural Minnesota and metro broadband adoption, accelerating adoption by 2 percent over its statistically anticipated growth; and increasing broadband subscribers by 38,556 more than could otherwise be expected.

Strategies include:

- train as many as 2,500 individuals in computer literacy, online education, and knowledge workforce strategies
- provide technical assistance and training to small businesses and entrepreneurs targeting the renewable energy, food, tourism and retail sectors
- distribute more than 1,000 refurbished computers to low-income, rural Minnesota residents.
- encourage and support community-based approaches to broadband adoption and use

In addition, MIRC communities use Intelligent Communities Forum indicators as a guide for evaluating progress in broadband adoption and use -- the first time rural communities have used this tool to inform and enhance their approach to community and economic development. ICF indicators are:

- Broadband Connectivity
- Knowledge Workers
- Digital Inclusion
- Innovation
- Marketing and Advocacy

Participants
Map available: http://broadband.blandinfoundation.org/_uls/resources/MIRCMap.pdf

Coalition coordinator
Blandin Foundation
Serves as fiscal agent for the federal grant and provides overall MIRC project management.

Statewide partners
These partners are collaborating in new and innovative ways to bring a variety of training and other resources and services to local communities across rural Minnesota

- University of Minnesota Extension Center for Community Vitality
- Minnesota State Colleges and Universities
- Intelligent Community Forum
- Minnesota Renewable Energy Marketplace
- Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development Workforce Centers and Workforce Center partners, including Adult Basic Education Partners
- PCs for People
- Regional Development Commissions (all 10 in Minnesota)

Demonstration communities
MIRC's 11 "Demonstration Communities" were selected through a "call-for-partners" process, and represent a variety of geographic areas in rural Minnesota. Each community -- which has a track record of locally led accomplishments in broadband and technology-based economic development -- received $100,000 to develop and implement broadband projects in their community/region.

- Benton County
- Cook County
- Grand Rapids/Itasca County
- Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe
- Stevens County
- Upper Minnesota Valley region
- Thief River Falls
- Willmar/Kandiyohi County
- Winona
- Windom
- Worthington

More than 60 MIRC demonstration community projects are currently underway to support and enhance the work of "community hubs" such as schools, health care facilities libraries, historical societies, business, and support agencies.

Full matrix of project summaries available:
http://broadband.blandinfoundation.org/_uls/resources/DCProjectMatrix_July_2011.pdf

Impacts on rural Minnesota

Community initiatives, led by community champions and accelerated through collaboration, are necessary and effective in ensuring broadband connectivity and technological vitality. The MIRC initiative is preparing tens of thousands of rural Minnesota residents, businesses and entire communities to take advantage of high-speed internet instead of being left behind because of it.

- **Intelligent Community Forum framework adapted for rural communities**

  Community Technology Advisors principal Bill Coleman, who works closely with MIRC communities, observes that ICF's multifaceted focus has created new coalitions in communities. People from different sectors of communities are interested in work related to different indicators, so people are making new connections.

- **Statewide broadband resources aligned**

  The MIRC project has created common ground for government offices, educational institutions and the private sector to collaborate and leverage strengths to develop and deliver to rural Minnesotans high-speed internet access and ideas and skills for how to best use it.

  Knowledge worker training

  Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) and Minnesota Learning Commons have coordinated design and development of a Knowledge Worker course and a Basic Digital Literacy curriculum. Both of these scenario-based, user-paced courses have been rolled out through Adult Basic Education and Workforce Centers throughout rural Minnesota. This fall, Knowledge Worker courses are being held in 13 rural Minnesota communities; courses will continue to be held through the end of 2012.

  University of MN Extension is on target to deliver, by the end of the grant period, training on use of broadband-enhanced services to at least 2,000 small businesses across rural Minnesota.

  - At least 60 of those businesses will receive targeted technical assistance.
  - In addition, at least 7,000 small businesses, especially minority and women-owned enterprises, will benefit from Extension outreach efforts highlighting the importance of enhanced technical literacy and broadband access.
  - In first quarter 2011 alone, Extension held 44 training events involving 443 businesses, 13 technical assistance activities reaching 13 businesses, and 9 outreach events reaching 130 individuals.

  MN Renewable Energy Marketplace (MNREM) is on target to deliver 1,500 hours of training and/or technical assistance on the use of broadband-based technologies and services to rural renewable energy businesses. In first quarter 2011 this rural nonprofit held six webinars focused on information and communication technology training needs of rural renewable energy businesses, involving 63 learners, and is following up with in-person meetings.

Access for low-income residents

PCs for People is well on its way to achieving its MIRC goal of placing 1,000 computers in homes of low-income rural Minnesotans. To date, the organization has distributed 679 computers, secured 1,051 computers, and refurbished 1,029 for future distribution. PCs for People also partners with internet service providers in MIRC Demonstration Communities to provide subscription discounts to computer recipients.

Telecommunications providers such as Consolidated Telephone in Baxter and Sjoberg Cable in Thief River Falls and others are stepping up to reduce service costs for Minnesotans who face barriers to internet access.

- **More Minnesotans using broadband**

These collaborations are making a difference: between June 2010 and June 2011, the adoption rate for broadband in MIRC demo communities increased by 5.2%, compared to non-MIRC communities, which had adoption rates of only 3.3% -- suggesting that a strategy of public awareness and intentional intervention has the effect of accelerating the adoption rate.

Community	Baseline	June 2011	Percentage point Change	Percent Change
MIRC Demo Communities	61.7%	64.9%	3.2	5.2%
Rural non-MIRC Communities	64.2%	66.3%	2.1	3.3%

The recently launched Digital Inclusion Community Partnership proposes an "equal partnership" model to put the cost of an annual high-speed internet subscription within reach for Minnesotans on restricted incomes. Generally, one-third of the cost will be covered by a MIRC grant, one-third by a provider discount, and one-third by the subscriber; other partnership models will also be considered.

- **Communities using broadband to craft their digital futures**

Through MIRC demonstration community projects, local citizens from multiple sectors (health care, education, government, business) are working together on projects they identify that will benefit their towns, and regions.

MIRC demonstration communities' response to the project proves the power of putting a community's broadband future into the hands of its residents.

  - The 11 communities are implementing an average of seven local projects -- about double what was estimated when the grant was awarded in 2010.

Full matrix of project summaries available:
http://broadband.blandinfoundation.org/_uls/resources/DCProjectMatrix_July_2011.pdf

- Benton County - its nine projects span education, economic development and connecting senior citizens to health care resources and family, to enhance quality of life and provide alternatives for independent living.

- New London-Spicer school district used a $5,000 MIRC grant from the Kandiyohi County EDC to pilot iPad use in schools. This fall, the district is asking voters for $1 million in bonding to provide iPads to all students, based on results of the pilot project.

- Windom - this community of just more than 4,000 in southern Minnesota boasts some of the fastest internet connections in the state. Its MIRC projects include putting laptops in emergency vehicles to aid in response, an online portal for businesses with a complementary QR code billboard campaign, and videoconferencing facilities available for business, public sector and educational uses.

- With a $40,000 match from the City of Winona, Fatima Said, a Bosnian refuge now executive director of Project FINE, heads the Technology Education for Immigrants and Refugees (TIER) MIRC project. TIER provides a spectrum of computer training courses from computer operation basics to internet access to more advanced sessions, in recent immigrants' native languages, specifically Hmong and Spanish. The program also offers courses in English for immigrants with longer residency. These classes are helping initiate intercultural community building, with startling benefits. For example, a Hispanic family delivered a washing machine to a Hmong family after a Hmong participant lamented a broken washer during a TIER class.

Barriers to broadband adoption and use

Demographic and socio-economic barriers are most common. Elderly and low-income rural Minnesota residents have substantially lower broadband adoption rates than the general population. A MIRC Demonstration Community baseline study conducted in October 2010, found that:

- almost 70 percent of non-adopters are 65 years of age or older
- 91 percent of them live in a household of 2 or fewer people
- 94 percent report having no school-age children living in their household
- 46 percent report a household income under $25,000.

While availability of broadband service is fairly good throughout Minnesota, significant access problems still exist for residents who live outside the municipal boundaries of small cities and towns. In other words, those who live out in the "countryside" face a barrier to access that other Minnesotans do not.

Evaluation strategies

NTIA reports available at: http://www2.ntia.doc.gov/grantees/CKBlandin

U.S. Department of Commerce Economic Development Administration Center at the University of Minnesota - Crookston tracks project impact. A baseline report was completed in October 2010.

Background resources

MIRC initiative
Project summary and background documents
http://broadband.blandinfoundation.org/programs/programs-detail.php?intResourceID=1060

2010 MIRC annual report to NTIA
http://www2.ntia.doc.gov/files/grantees/ckblandinsbaapr2010.pdf

CK Blandin Foundation page on Broadband USA site
http://www2.ntia.doc.gov/grantees/CKBlandin

Blandin on Broadband blog
www.blandinonbroadband.wordpress.com

Baller Herbst - free subscription
list@baller.com

Videos

"Journey to broadband in 3 MN communities"
Minnesota community leaders discuss needs for and successes of broadband
http://broadband.blandinfoundation.org/resources/videos-detail.php?intResourceID=1493

Blandin on Broadband YouTube channel
http://www.youtube.com/user/blandinonbroadband

For more information
Contact information for key MIRC spokespeople, including Blandin Foundation staff, Community Technology Advisors staff, and MIRCpartners, is available from:

Allison Ahcan
Communications Director
Blandin Foundation
Direct: 218-327-8717
arahcan@blandinfoundation.org