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County Board Praises “Digital Inclusion”

BY MARY MORGAN

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Washtenaw County board of commissioners meeting (April 6, 2011): An initiative that’s providing refurbished computers to low-income residents won praise from county commissioners at their most recent meeting.

The board heard a report on the Digital Inclusion project, which was launched in 2008 to help address the county’s “digital divide” – the gap between people with computers and Internet access, and residents who lack those resources. Run by B.Side: The Business Side of Youth at Eastern Michigan University, the program uses old computers donated by the county government, and trains youth to refurbish them for re-use. To date, the program has distributed over 200 computers to low-income residents.

Digital Inclusion: Computers for Low-Income Residents

Wednesday’s meeting included a presentation about a program that provides refurbished computers to low-income residents. Derrick Jackson, director of community engagement for the sheriff’s office, began by telling commissioners that he had chaired a digital divide task force that was formed in 2007, when he was working as a deputy county clerk. The task force was an outgrowth of the Wireless Washtenaw initiative, which aimed to provide wireless Internet service to all residents in the county. [That project is no longer active.]

Organizers of Wireless Washtenaw realized that they needed to address the county’s digital divide – to help the people who didn’t have access to computers. In his own life, Jackson said, he’s “connected to the matrix” through his personal cell phone, his work cell phone, his laptop computer. He can access things like the county’s online employment information, and receive email alerts with job listings. There are others who have more limited access, through their jobs, school or library. But there’s another group that has no access at all, he said.

Of the roughly 138,000 homes in Washtenaw County, a survey found that 20-25% have no computer. Of those, residents of about 9,000 homes indicated that the key factor was cost, Jackson said: “They simply could not afford it.” So the task force focused on those 9,000 homes, and looked at how they could provide computers to those residents. They used the Food Gatherers model, he said – collecting computers that would otherwise be headed to the landfill, refurbishing them, and getting them into the hands of people who need them.

They got a \$16,200 grant from the Ann Arbor Area Community Foundation to get started, with the goal of becoming a self-sustaining program – and that’s what has happened, Jackson said. The task force is a great example of what government can do, he said – for a small amount of resources, their work was having a large impact, thanks to the efforts of the B.Side: The Business Side of Youth at Eastern Michigan University. Launched in 2007, B.Side is a program to develop entrepreneurship and self-sufficiency in young people ages 13-20.

Jackson handed off the presentation to the B.Side's director, Jack Bidlack. In October 2008, the B.Side started its digital inclusion program, Bidlack said, working out of space provided by EMU's College of Business. They initially trained five youth to clean and refurbish 86 computers that they received from Washtenaw County government. By December of 2008, 80 computers were ready for use, and turned over to the county's Employment Training & Community Services (ETCS) department for redistribution to low-income residents.

It became apparent that ETCS wasn't equipped to handle the technical questions that arose from people who received these computers, so B.Side took that on as well, Bidlack said, seeing it as additional opportunity for training youth. They created a system that allowed ETCS to distribute vouchers, and residents would bring those vouchers to B.Side in exchange for computers.

In 2010, they attended an ETCS open house to promote the program, Bidlack said. While they didn't get much response that day, word soon spread and within two weeks they'd been contacted by about 50 people. Over the next four months they distributed 125 computers – more than they'd given out in the previous 18 months.

The program has employed 14 local youth, Bidlack said, including over 1,200 hours of paid training. One young man who worked with the program for a year made over \$2,000, he said, in addition to learning technical and leadership skills. Last fall they did a pilot program, working with special needs students at Ypsilanti High School. They've also hired four EMU student site coordinators for the program, and one community coordinator to oversee the Ypsilanti High School project.

In total, the program has refurbished 212 computers, helping bridge the digital divide for over 200 residents and nonprofits in the county, he said. They've also been able to raise funds equivalent to the grant they received from the community foundation – about \$16,000 – to sustain the program.

In the future, they hope to continue their partnership with Washtenaw County, Bidlack said. B.Side picks up the computers, so no county labor is involved. The county saves money by not having to pay to have its old computers hauled away, he said. They're also partnering with EMU, which will give them another source of computers to refurbish. And by the end of April, they expect to become an official job-training program with Michigan Works, the state employment agency.

Bidlack said possible expansion might include opening a retail store, or becoming a recycling program for other electronics as well.

He concluded by thanking EMU, the university's College of Business, the county and Derrick Jackson in particular for helping with the program. He noted that they've created a sustainable model – he wasn't there asking for funding.

Digital Inclusion: Commissioner Comments, Questions

Kristen Judge said it was great to hear about good projects like this. She wondered if they've looked for private funders or partners to help support the project. It would be a good fit for the Washtenaw County Cyber Citizenship Coalition (WC4), she noted. Bidlack said they hadn't reached that point yet.

Judge wondered whether they were looking for more computers to refurbish, or whether they were at capacity. Bidlack replied that they weren't yet a recycler, so if they got too many computers, it would be a drain on their resources.

Noting potential privacy issues, Judge also asked whether the program involved removing data that might be left on the old computers. Bidlack reported that they use a software program that clears the hard drives of data; they then install clean operating systems.

Yousef Rabhi observed that the program addresses several important things. First, it embraces the concept of reuse, which is better for the environment than recycling, and it's keeping toxic equipment out of the landfills. The program provides computers for people who need them, and trains youth so that they can actually make something. Rabhi said he's proud to live in a community where an organization like B.Side is so well-supported.

Barbara Bergman said she was thrilled with the program. Noting that the focus is on the eastern side of the county, which she acknowledged had needs, Bergman said there are also residents of Ann Arbor who lack access to computers. Are there plans to expand the program to the west?

Bidlack said they don't have plans to expand beyond Ypsilanti at this point – the program grew so fast that they're just trying to keep up with demand. But they could always look for partners to help bring the program to other parts of the county, he said.

Dan Smith asked about the computer specs. Bidlack said all the computers are running on Windows XP, and are installed with freeware – software available at no cost. The cost of licensing commercial software programs would be too high, he said. The computers have 40-gigabyte hard drives and most have a Pentium 4 processor. Since most people use the computers for Internet access, not for storing data, the capacity needs aren't as great, Bidlack said.

Smith also asked how they raised the \$16,000 in revenues. Bidlack said most of the money is through ETCS grants, via its voucher program.