

Broadband USA Applications Database

Applicant Name: Hot Springs Greater Learning Foundation

Project Title: Big Horn Basin Technology Center

Project Type: Public Computer Center

Executive Summary

The Big Horn Basin region of North-central Wyoming is a sparsely populated rural area of five counties and the adjacent Wind River Indian Reservation, with a total population of about 90,000. The proposed Technology Center is part of a creative approach to long-standing rural problems that plague the region -- lack of job opportunities for young people, seasonal jobs that cannot sustain families, limited opportunities for educational and job training beyond K-12 public education, limited access to public technology, limited markets to sell artisan goods, drop-outs/juvenile justice issues and health care issues. In our local community, there has also been an inability to market natural resources assets and find ways to build on existing tourism traffic.

Hot Springs Greater Learning Foundation has spearheaded a grassroots movement to address these issues in a creative way. After a community assessment study identified local problems, the Foundation raised public and private funds to hire consultants and work with local and state agencies to identify potential solutions. The approach that developed from this effort was based on an “asset-based management” concept developed by the Appalachian Regional Commission – to use our human capital, our cultural and natural resources – who we are, what we do, where we live – as the basis on which to build a sustainable economy.

The proposed Big Horn Basin Technology Center is a stand-alone component of a major complex, Big Horn Basin Nature & Discovery Center to be located in Hot Springs State Park. The complex is designed to create a recognizable regional presence and an important tourism destination site, thus building on a strong local resource and existing state-wide traffic patterns. A state-funded research project determined that the complex can affect Hot Springs County by at least \$2-3 million a year in additional visitor spending alone, with significant additional employment, earnings and tax receipts in Big Horn, Fremont, Park, Hot Springs and Washakie counties. The project allows the region to retain its rural identity. It offers opportunities for students, entrepreneurs, artisans and our regional workforce.

The Technology Center component drives the main complex but is designed primarily as a community education and job training center to improve job skills and provide access to continuing education through local, online and two-way videoconferencing. In addition to extended public access and community programs, several key components broaden the scope of the Technology Center:

* entrepreneurial think-tank designed to help teach students and community members to develop entrepreneurial and business skills;

- * ecommerce services for regional artisans and agri-tourism with an active marketing program.
- * state-wide tourism/travel service that links parks, historic and cultural sites as well as businesses related to regional natural resources; provide self-guided tours and custom mapping for travelers.
- * ties with scientists and professionals working in the field, providing opportunities for hands-on programs and activities that create meaningful experiences for students and opportunities for technological research.

The complete project has been endorsed by the state of Wyoming, Hot Springs County, Town of Thermopolis, state government officials, and numerous government agencies and educational institutions. In 2008, it was named outstanding state project by Wyoming Resource Conservation & Development Council. Because of widespread economic implications, it is included in the five-year plan for the Big Horn Mountain Country Coalition Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS).

By leasing space for the Technology Center in an existing professional office building on Broadway (about 10 blocks from the proposed park site), we will be able to create the complex, hone sustainable programs and activities, and begin making a difference within 18-24 months -- far ahead of the main complex construction.

The Technology Center will be managed by the Foundation, working under a joint powers governing board (Town of Thermopolis/Hot Springs County). The Foundation has managed grants and projects from local, state and federal granting organizations and worked closely with numerous local and state government agencies. Its board of directors is made up of business professionals and retired business professionals with many years of experience. The Foundation believes in partnerships; and its advisory committees include specialists from federal, state and local agencies as well as business professionals (see short bios).

The Technology Center will create 10 jobs during its installation, plus four full-time positions and six part-time instructors. This does not include short-term contracts for consultants. These jobs are technical, professional and office jobs that do not exist at this time. Day-camp programs will involve additional work for 10 contract and 5 subcontract workers, ranging from food services to recreational leaders.

More important than on-site jobs is the ramification of what the Center does – upgrading skills to improve the existing workforce, educating a young workforce in how to create its own jobs, providing ecommerce services to help artisans and other businesses sell their goods and services, attracting more visitors to the region, actively engaging seniors in the use of technology through special programs/projects. This impact is difficult to measure but is even more important to the region than onsite job creation numbers since it invests in our regional human infrastructure.

The estimated investment for creating the Technology Center and providing community tools to make a regional difference is \$1.2 million.

This project is designed to be replicable on many levels, from its methodology of determining issues to the actual technology center and/or its scope of programming.