Broadband USA Applications Database

Applicant Name:  City of Houston

Project Title:  Houston WeCAN Sustainable Broadband Adoption Initiative

Project Type:  Sustainable Adoption

_______________________ Executive Summary _________________________

a) Market research indicates that 58 percent of Houstonians access the Internet via broadband or some other high-speed connection, but the City of Houston has identified 27 communities where subscription rates average just 32 percent. Demographics in these areas correspond with findings from the 2009 Pew Internet and American Life Project, which highlighted several indicators with high negative correlation to broadband adoption and usage. Per pew, at-risk groups at risk included African-Americans, those with a high school diploma or less, and senior citizens. These groups include individuals and families who live in poverty, making, broadband access and computers a luxury that remains out of reach. Others see little reason to go online: the Pew study found that 50 percent of non-broadband users cited relevance as an issue. Without access to broadband, the skills to take advantage of this access and the awareness of its benefits, these vulnerable populations will remain on the periphery of 21st century society.

b) Through its Digital Inclusion Initiative, WeCAN, the City has already begun addressing the community’s digital needs through provision of fundamental computer skills training at Houston Public Library branches and other sites. In addition, the City recently launched WeCAN Works, an innovative digital literacy and workforce readiness public/private partnership that provides training to the underserved, unskilled, and underemployed for sustainable career paths. This program serves a limited number of unemployed and underemployed individuals with digital literacy and workforce-readiness training, but can be expanded with BTOP assistance. The City has also created a community resource portal to allow easy access to quality of life information and e-learning programs and opportunities; however, the portal is not widely marketed and sees limited usage. Building on these efforts, the City will address the community’s broadband adoption issues by:

- Expanding the WeCAN Works program, broadening its scope in terms of geography and reach across Houston while increasing efforts to encourage small businesses to view broadband and the Internet as a means to economic growth and success;

- Launching an aggressive, focused marketing effort designed to increase awareness of the benefits of broadband and BTOP-funded opportunities, including WeCAN Works and the public computer centers for which funding is requested under a separate BTOP application from the City;

- Increasing understanding and usage of the WeCAN community portal, which offers content that is educational, relevant (including neighborhood-centric information in a variety of languages), and might not otherwise be accessible; and
• Equipping small businesses and residents with the opportunity to buy computer hardware and software at reduced cost – or even for free – through a discounted community-purchase program that offers additional subsidies for hardware and software purchases as a reward for completion of digital literacy and workforce readiness training classes and sharing of technical knowledge gained with others; in addition, local school districts will acquire 500 computer/modem packages and accompanying software for take-home use by students who lack home Internet access.

This project is innovative for its comprehensive combination of workforce-relevant digital literacy training, marketing and community outreach, and provision of necessary tools and resources to ensure increased and sustainable broadband access and utilization.

c) The project covers the city of Houston, America’s fourth-largest city with a population of more than 2.24 million, based on estimates from the City’s Planning and Development Department. The 2007 American Community Survey showed 41.7 percent of Houston’s population of Hispanic descent, with African-Americans comprising 24.6 percent of the populace. Senior citizens (aged 65 and over) represented 8.7 percent of the population, while 21.8 percent of Houstonians lived in poverty. While this initiative reaches across Houston, it targets 27 “super neighborhoods” with a total population of 478,078; virtually all of these areas have demographics above the norm in at least one of the above categories. Aside from these groups, the program focuses on the unemployed, a rapidly growing group in Houston, where Texas Workforce Commission statistics show the unemployment rate reached 7.6 percent in June 2009 after hovering in the 4 percent range one year before. The City’s proposal focuses on increasing broadband subscribership citywide, emphasizing the estimated 76 percent of residents in the 27 selected neighborhoods who do not have or utilize broadband Internet access.

d) The City of Houston is well-equipped to implement this project, as evidenced by its record of establishing partnerships with the educational, private and non-profit sectors to encourage workforce development and digital skills training. As indicated above, the City’s Digital Inclusion Initiative has already begun to address the digital divide. With an annual operating budget of $4.2 billion, the City has sufficient resources to dedicate to BTOP-related efforts. While the recent economic downturn has impacted the City’s revenue streams, digital inclusion remains a priority for the City, which will leverage its efforts with community partners to ensure success.

e) The program will create two full-time jobs (an Outreach and Operations Manager and a Community Portal Coordinator), along with 15 part-time instructor positions equal to 4 FTEs. In addition, the proposed investment in branding/public relations and advertising and the demand for an estimated 15,500 new computers and related equipment will contribute to the creation and/or saving of an indeterminate number of positions.

f) Projected project costs are $4,509,190, including $3,124,190 in requested federal funding and $1,385,000 in cash and in-kind match from local sources.