Broadband USA Applications Database

Applicant Name: HOT SPRINGS GREATER LEARNING FOUNDATION

Project Title: Big Horn Basin Wyoming Center

Project Type: Public Computer Center

_______________________ Executive Summary _______________________

Big Horn Basin Nature & Discovery Center is a proposed complex to be built on state park land (Hot Springs State Park) in Thermopolis, Wyoming. At its heart is a technology center that acts as a 21st economic engine that addresses a broad spectrum of rural issues. 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 (total population: 90,000), with 22 municipalities and towns. Its strengths are its natural resources -- more wildlife than in any part of the U.S., a broad range of ecosystems from Yellowstone to vast sage steppes. Its agricultural season is short, water scarce. There is no metropolitan area, no large manufacturers or businesses, few year-round jobs. Young people -- our biggest investment -- leave for more education or jobs. Professionals find too few clients/patients to make a living and leave. Our populations age in place, many without skills for today's jobs. Many, who have assets or skills, have no way to market them because they do not know how to take advantage of today's technological advances. Small town governments and counties have shrinking resources as real estate values drop and businesses shut down. How can they worry about major long-term issues when they must find ways to keep the library open, the public health nurse funded, replace aging first-responder vehicles, repair aging streets, sewer and water systems. They certainly don't have funds to hire think-tanks or fund strategic management teams. Economically poor conditions have supported old concepts of local and regional rivalries reinforced by a long-standing history of independence/"going it alone". Getting people to overcome distrust of government, newcomers and new ideas can be daunting. But the Big Horn Basin is not unique. These problems are echoed throughout rural America. Hot Springs Greater Learning Foundation raised public and private funds to hire consultants and work with local and state agencies to identify potential solutions. It took months to develop a cooperative venture bringing together public and private, business and nonprofit groups to further the overall project. The approach that developed was based on an "asset-based management" concept developed by the Appalachian Regional Commission -- to use human capital, cultural and natural resources -- who we are, what we do, where we live -- as the basis on which to build a sustainable economy. Because resources are so scarce, our tendency in rural America is to find multiple ways to use those resources. That is at the heart of this project -- using technical resources as an economic engine addressing job creation, job training, continuing education, aging seniors and social services. At the same time it is used to create a greater awareness and build on the area's strength and existing traffic patterns -- 1.2 million tourists who visit our state park annually; but they don't stay long enough to make an economic difference -- day travelers in Hot Springs County spend an average of $20/day per party, compared to a statewide average of $175/day. A state-funded research project determined that the complex can affect Hot Springs County
alone by at least $2-3 million a year in additional visitor spending, with added employment, earnings and tax receipts in the surrounding counties. It offers opportunities to sell more and better services -- opportunities for students, entrepreneurs, artisans and our regional workforce -- a showplace for artisans/artists, a way to link visitors with existing businesses, a way to help build new businesses as demands increase or change. The Technology Center is the driving engine of the complex. It includes: * entrepreneurial think-tank designed to help teach students and community members to develop entrepreneurial and business skills; * eCommerce services and education 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 business related to regional natural resources; provides self-guided tours and custom mapping for travelers -- all through a statewide database built by our Center. * 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 (archaeology, geology, rock art, fossils, wildlife). * programs and activities of interest to seniors (scrapbooks, oral & family histories), working toward specially designed hardware/software that creates an aging-user-friendly interface designed to change health care services and cut costs. As a public computer center, we will provide continuing education, job training and re-education opportunities at no charge to our community. But there are specific opportunities for service fees, referral fees, and long-distance fee-based access programs for classrooms that will help create a sustainable center. The Center allows us to create national webinars and onsite workshops, daycamps, conferences in several specialty areas, including educational brain theory, teacher training in outdoor recreation/education for handicapped (CEU) program. The broadband funding will allow us to begin with the Technology Center component, and leverage funds from other government and private sources to build other components, i.e., performance & demonstration areas, galleries, exhibits and workshops -- all of which will help provide more jobs and revenue. The Center will create 20 jobs during construction. A pro-active operation requires a strong management team, and we anticipate a minimum of five management-level positions, 3 middle-management and 7 FTE jobs in maintenance, security, landscape, front-desk personnel, and visitation services. The technology center will require four FTE technicians and teachers. Many programs -- such as the astronomy program, the day camps for handicapped children are stand-alone projects that will have their own instructors and staff. We estimate that within three years, the daycamp programs will involve the FTE of 10 professional and semi-professional workers. This is a lot of work in our region. And it is critical that we start this project now. Broadband technology funding will help jump-start this project and leverage a great opportunity. Right now, construction costs are 30% less than they were when we priced the project 3 years ago. We can buy a lot more for our investment dollar -- yet finding those dollars is difficult now. National foundations that give in Wyoming have always been few. The economic downturn and financial market difficulties hit public entities and private foundations severely. Some changed their focus; others closed. Our local financial institutions have been weakened. We anticipate it will take 3-4 years before we can raise the money to start construction without this grant. By that time, the economy may have recovered enough that prices will have increased. By combining federal, state, county, town and private not-for-profit monies, we spread funding across a broad range of sources -- and put a solid economic engine in place that can make a difference quickly.