Community Technology Fund
Special Project Proposal

March 5, 2003

Project Name: Building Information Age Communities Planning Mini Grants Year 2

Sponsoring Entity: University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension, Technologies Across Nebraska, Nebraska Information Technology Commission Community Council

Amount Requested: $20,000

Executive Summary

The University of Nebraska's Technologies Across Nebraska initiative, in partnership with the Nebraska Information Technology Commission's Community Council, is proposing an additional year of funding for the promising IT Planning and Mini Grant Program. The program assists communities and regional groups in conducting community information technology assessments and in developing technology plans to utilize information technology to enhance community and economic development. Initial program evaluations indicate that the Community IT Planning and Assessment Workbook developed for the program is a useful resource. The Community IT Planning and Mini Grant program has energized local technology committees and focused their efforts. The 8 participating communities and regional groups in year one of the program are expected to have technology plans completed by May 2003.

Funding the program for a second year will allow Technologies Across Nebraska to build upon the lessons learned from year one and expand the program to eight additional communities or regional groups. The $20,000 requested will provide the 8 community or regional groups participating in year two of the program with up to $2,500 in funding for conducting community surveys or other planning related activities.

Project Description

The Community IT Planning and Mini Grant program provides assistance in conducting community or regional information technology assessments and in developing technology plans. The eight communities and regional groups currently participating in year one of the program are Alliance; Brown, Keya Paha and Rock Counties; Custer County; Crawford-Harrison; Edgar; Fillmore County; West Point; and York County. The communities participating range in population from 8,959 (Alliance) to 279 (Harrison) and are geographically dispersed across the state.

The participating community and regional groups are piloting the *Community IT Planning and Assessment Workbook*. Participating in the program has energized local technology committees and focused their efforts. Initial reactions to the workbook have been positive. At the suggestion of one of the participating regional groups, a sample plan

was developed   Most community and regional groups are in the process of completing their initial assessments.   Updates on the activities of the participating community and regional groups are available at http://www.nitc.state.ne.us/toolkit/pilot/index.htm .

The Crawford-Harrison regional group provides an example of the progress being made by the participating groups.   The communities of Crawford and Harrison focused initial efforts on the preparation of a grant application for the RUS Community Connect broadband program.   A community survey was also done to determine technology usage, the demand for broadband services, and interest in training opportunities. Results from the survey indicate that technology use is high among area residents. Only four out of 159 respondents reported not owning a computer. Fewer than 16 of the respondents reported having no Internet connection. Approximately 120 of the respondents have a dial-up modem connection. There is strong interest in training-- especially for e-commerce training. Approximately 60 respondents indicated that they would be interested in e-commerce training. About 35 respondents indicated that they would be interested in basic Internet training.   The survey and the results are available from the project Web site.

The Crawford-Harrison group is currently working on developing a technology plan for the area.

Funding the program for a second year will allow Technologies Across Nebraska and the NITC Community Council to build upon the lessons learned from year 1 and expand the program to eight additional communities or regional groups. The mini grant program will provide eight additional Nebraska communities or regional groups with up to $2,500 in funding for conducting community assessments or other activities which support the development of community or regional plans to utilize information technology to enhance community and economic development.   At a recent conference call, participants indicated that the availability of the $2,500 provided an incentive to organize a technology committee and to focus efforts on technology assessment and planning.

Year 2 Project Goal:

Building leadership capacity in Nebraska's rural communities to address IT development.

Year 2 Project Activities and Timeline

April

- Form selection committee.
- Develop guidelines and application form.

May-July

- Publicize availability of the planning mini grants.
- Update toolkit materials based upon final evaluation of year one participants.

August

- Select and announce the 8 community or regional groups selected to participate in year 2 of the program.

September-October

- Hold an initial meeting with each participating community or regional group to introduce them to the Community IT Planning and Assessment Workbook and to begin the assessment process.

November - May

- Work with communities to develop IT plans. Communities will be required to submit a written work plan and budget in order to receive mini planning grant funds.
- Evaluate toolkit materials.   If necessary, revisions to toolkit materials will be made.

May

- Conduct regional focus groups to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the toolkit materials and the planning process and to solicit suggestions.

Expected Outcomes, Project Deliverables, and Evaluation Data Collection

Project Outcome: Eight communities or regional groups will develop IT plans.

> **Quantitative Data Collection:** The number of communities or regional groups participating in the planning process and the number of communities or regional groups completing IT plans will be reported.
>
> **Project Deliverable:** Local IT plans and any materials developed will be made available on the Community IT Toolkit Web site.

Project Outcome: Development of additional toolkit materials and/or revisions to toolkit materials which can be used to help other communities.

> **Project Deliverable:**   A report summarizing the project and lessons learned will be written and made available from the Community IT Toolkit Web site.   Any other materials developed or revised will be made available from the Community IT Toolkit Web site. In the project's final report, these materials will be listed with links to their location on the Web site.

Project Outcome: Community leaders will be better prepared to address IT-related community and development

> **Quantitative Data Collection:**   Community leaders will be asked to fill out a brief survey indicating their satisfaction with the process and how the process has impacted their ability to address IT-related development.

> **Qualitative Data Collection:**   Regional focus groups will be conducted to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the toolkit materials and the planning process and to solicit suggestions.

> **Project Deliverable:**   A report summarizing the project and lessons learned will be written and made available from the Community IT Toolkit Web site.

Project Outcome: Nebraska's communities will begin to utilize information technology in ways that enhance community and economic development.

> This expected outcome will probably not be realized until after the one-year time limit of this grant.   However, every effort will be made to follow-up with the communities to document the ways in which information technology is being used to enhance community and economic development.

Budget

$20,000 for eight $2,500 mini grants.