

## **Introduction**

### **Building the Community Information Toolkit**

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In June of 1996, Ameritech announced its intention to fund a series of grants, as a part of the Michigan Bell Shareable Earnings settlement, in support of statewide training initiatives. The Library of Michigan Foundation, with the support of the state's Public Library Cooperatives proposed a project to develop a Community Information Toolkit and, equally as important, to allow the toolkit to be field tested by two local community libraries. In the fall of 1996 Ameritech awarded the Foundation a grant in the amount of \$166,666 to support this project.

Not all that long ago – 1992 – few, if any, public libraries in Michigan were connected to, or able to access, the Internet. Today 94% of Michigan's public libraries are connected to the Internet and we have begun to re-educate ourselves and re-define what the public library can, and should, be in an electronic era. It was out of this environment of change and challenge that the Community Information Toolkit Project was conceived.

With the increasing amount of federal and state government information available on the Internet, many of us began to envision how the library might help the local community in bringing community information on-line through the web. As library staff became more proficient in their roles as Internet information 'consumers' it was only natural to begin to examine what other roles public libraries could play in delivering electronic information. The local community was the logical place to start.

Of course the connection between libraries and community information is nothing new. From the index card tacked to the bulletin board, to the sophisticated on-line community information and referral file, libraries and local information are a natural fit. Since the mid 1970's we have used technology to assist us in delivering hard to find local information to our patrons. Typically we have met obstacles in the form of clumsy technology, or tedious and time consuming updating requirements. Our patrons have put up with paper indexes that did not list agencies were they looked for them, as well as mediated databases that often delayed the delivery of urgently needed information. Today the combination of more sophisticated technology, and increased access points via the Internet, make possible a much more comprehensive response.

With the promise of appropriate technology and access we examined what additional barriers stood in the way of the delivery of electronic local community information. It was clear to us that the local public library was a logical place to find the commitment and expertise required to assure that the 'global village' would meet distinctly local needs. But what would be needed to help the local library assume this leadership role? What were the common elements critical to the success of any Internet/local community information project? We settled on the following:

- A clear mission statement
- Strong community partnerships
- Relevant content

- Technological expertise
- Financial resources sufficient to fulfill the mission

The absence of any of these elements could doom a project to failure and seriously damage a library's credibility as it tried to assert a leadership role in bringing about local projects. Our statewide challenge was to develop a framework through which we could provide the tools necessary to achieve success. Training in the use and application of new technologies for public library staff was a strongly supported objective for the Library of Michigan. Due to generous support from the Library of Michigan, the public library cooperatives were doing an excellent job in the technology training. But could we develop an approach that would include the leadership and other (often non-technology) skills we had identified as so critical to success?

Our response was to develop a "toolkit" that could be used by any local library and community group to plan and implement their project. Our virtual box of tools includes:

- A review of successful community information projects
- Sample vision/mission statements taken from real projects
- Examples & strategies for forming local partnerships
- Examples & strategies for fund raising
- Curriculum materials for basic Internet training
- Curriculum materials for basic introduction to community information
- Curriculum materials for identifying, soliciting, organizing, integrating, and converting content into digital form.
- Curriculum materials for publishing & maintaining content and archiving web sites
- Local site hardware and software recommendations
- A primer on server set up and configuration
- A program to be used to create a local community calendar
- A bibliography

Originally envisioned as a one year project to conclude in December of 1997 the project was subject to some early delays as players and responsibilities changed. Not unlike a local community collaboration, we had grand ideas but were somewhat slow to get started. In mid 1997 the Library of Michigan issued an RFP to formally begin work on the project. A project team responded representing a variety of organizations and expertise including:

- The Michigan Electronic Library, a project of the Library of Michigan and the University of Michigan with a web site devoted to analyzing and collecting Internet content;
- Merit Network, Inc., the largest Internet Service Provider in Michigan and the most frequent choice for schools and libraries;
- The Library Network, a public library cooperative with an extensive public library training program;

- Internet consultants Richard Wiggins and Charles Severance, both of whom have considerable technological expertise and experience with both the library and K12 communities.
- Clarus Information Architects, a local Michigan consulting firm with expertise in community-based Internet training and web development.

In 1998, two demonstration sites joined the project team to work with us on implementing the project. One of the lessons learned early on was that we needed to work with these sites throughout the duration of the project. The earlier plan, to finalize all toolkit elements before introducing them to the demonstration sites, was abandoned as impractical. In fact the project team learned as much from the demonstration sites as they did from us. While this led to some additional delays it was probably the most significant change in approach that occurred and contributed to the eventual success of the project.

On February 4, 1999, the first demonstration site, the Rochester Hills Public Library, had a public unveiling of their project, Greater Rochester History Online (GHRO). GHRO focuses on cultural, historical and governmental information of the community. Community partners are Rochester Hills Museum at Van Hoosen Farm and the Special Collections Department of Oakland University. The project revolves around digitization of the Ray Russell postcard collection which includes over 300 postcards depicting downtown Rochester and other scenes of early community life in the Greater Rochester area in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. (<http://www.metronet.lib.mi.us/ROCH/GRHO>).

The Romeo District Library project involves making Community Events information accessible via their Web site.. They have used the software developed by the project team (and made available in the Toolkit) to create a local community calendar to provide information on programs, events and schedules of the Parks and Recreation Department, STAR (Senior Transportation Through Advanced Reservation), and other community agencies. Romeo has also addressed the needs of its visually and/or physically handicapped residents both by the information they will have online and by the installation of adaptive technologies to enable access by the visually impaired at the library.

Through these projects the elements of the toolkit were finalized and training for other public and school library staff across the state was held in late 1998 through early 1999. The final toolkit is available on our web site ([www.mel.org/citoolkit](http://www.mel.org/citoolkit)) and via CD-ROM. It includes a 250 page introductory user manual detailing how to build a community information network, how to select the technologies that best suit your purpose, web authoring tools, web design, working with digital images, sounds, audio and video, and site and server maintenance. In addition you'll find examples from the best community information sites we could find and practical tips from people who have experience in delivering electronic content to local communities.

The Toolkit also includes four videos (see below), a set of PowerPoint presentations suitable for use in training your community team and a set of tools to provide a community calendar, a community discussion forum, and a mechanism for authorizing users of the system.

## **Toolkit Videos:**

**Introduction to Community Networking:** observations of experts and from pioneering community networks in Michigan.

**Beginning Webmastering:** an overview of HTML, an introduction to authoring tools, how to use scanners, digital cameras, and image editing software.

**Advanced Web Content Choices:** understanding image maps, animated GIFs, Shockwave, JavaScript, Java, Active X, VRML.

**Web Site Maintenance and Administration:** Understanding how to run your own server.

While the toolkit project has stretched over a longer period of time than was intended, it has produced much more comprehensive materials than were originally envisioned. We believe the toolkit can provide invaluable assistance to libraries in bringing local community information to the Internet. It is the project team's hope that, through the efforts of the Library of Michigan and MEL, the project will continue as we further develop our understanding of the contributions the local public library can make in bringing on-line local information to the Internet.

