

Promoting Online Social Networks in Small Communities

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During the Small Town and Rural group discussion at the APA conference the idea of expanding informal networks through the internet was brought up as an idea that could help seniors better connect with resources and their community. Web-based tools such as **Nextdoor**, an online networking service neighbors can use to join a social network based in place, allows neighbors to have access to each other via the internet and enables them to reach out and form a social safety net within the community ([see issue brief](#)). Planners in the discussion raised two concerns: access to the internet and the likelihood of seniors joining the online community.

In response one planner mentioned that seniors are the fastest growing group joining online communities. If seniors need help in using the internet, a multigenerational solution is to invite youth and elders to work together in teaching seniors to navigate the web. This can be done in school computer labs in the evenings.

One of the challenges for small and rural towns is how to gain access to the internet for all residents. In some towns internet access is shared from one or a few routers centrally located in a common facility such as a town office, hospital, library or community center. This requires someone to set up the router; from there the town collectively pays for access and is able to sustain a connection for all residents at low cost. There were examples of this in Northern Michigan where a volunteer set up a wireless connection that was able to serve the entire community. Group members also suggested the possibility of sharing bandwidth with larger institutions such as hospitals or even schools that would have access to an internet network large enough to sustain many users.

Internet access has become increasingly important for citizens of all ages in communities all over the U.S. Small and rural places often suffer high costs and lower internet access which is why planners need to think creatively in order to improve internet connectivity. STAR discussion participants had many innovative ideas that could serve as viable solutions for rural and small towns to gain access to the internet.