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Executive Summary

Ponderwell proposes to build a web-based community driven local news outlet to showcase events and news as presented by local writers, photographers, and videographers. The project will produce an easy to navigate website enabling local residents to access news and information on a much broader range of topics than can be covered by the limited staff of existing area news outlets. It will also provide opportunities for training, skill development, and professional exposure for contributors, while promoting the goal of a better informed citizenry.

For those who wish to contribute to the site rather than just read, the project will also encompass an interface for volunteer citizen journalists to pick up assignments from a virtual "assignment desk". These assignments can be submitted by the public, by other contributors, or by local businesses or non-profit organizations, and can relate either to specific events or to ongoing story concepts which they would like investigated. Upon accepting and completing an assignment, contributors will submit it to an anonymous editor's desk, where one of the community editors must approve it before publishing it to the site.

Other aspects of the project will include: a partnership with local schools to allow students to publish articles to their school's section of the site; a tutoring program which would allow inexperienced writers/photographers/videographers to sign up to be mentored by more experienced members of the community in order to improve their skills; a public events calendar and linked community guide which would make locating local businesses easier for newcomers to our area as well as providing more visibility for our many local businesses and craftspeople; and contributor forums to resolve any difficulties and cultivate an ongoing interest in improving both the process and the product.

We strongly believe that encouraging people to feel a responsibility toward the news, both in understanding and reporting it, is the solution to many of the problems currently facing the mainstream media industry. Because citizen journalists cover events of interest to them, they are able to present a broad, multicultural range of subject material, often informing their readers of organizations or events which would otherwise be left in the dark due to their small size or niche audience. Citizen journalists may be on the ground at the site of breaking news, providing relevant and timely coverage. Online publication is the perfect medium for such a range of topics, allowing readers to easily navigate to their areas of interest, and is the way of the future for all news publications as computer literacy and awareness of the environmental impact of printing traditional newspapers increases. It is one of those few instances where everyone can benefit.

Ponderwell, LLC, is a web and software development company based in Asheville. Our staff has over forty years of computer development experience and an extensive background in social networking web development.

"In building healthy, productive online communities, one of the most important ingredients is to seed those communities with thoughtful, intelligent and proactive people as leaders who initiate and steer along productive discussions. In creating Newsvine, which has grown to the size of millions of active users, we did not know whether that factor was achievable or not, beforehand. Ponderwell was created by some of the very people that helped make the Newsvine community take off. So, it is highly likely that with the involvement and work of these proven leaders, the project will set off on a path toward building and maintaining a healthy forum for its user base." --Calvin Tang, Newsvine.com Founder

a. Budget

Budget for 6 months ending:	Mar 2012	Sep 2012	Mar 2013	Sep 2013	Mar 2014	Sep 2014
Expenses						
Salaries: Editor/Liason	5573	11147	11147	11147	11147	11147
Salaries: Programmer					5057	5057
Salaries: Marketing					1119	2238
Salaries: Ad Designer					1796	3538
Office and Expenses	2400	2400	2400	2400	3600	3600
Site Hosting	600	600	600	600	600	600
Site Build and Maintain	30000	5000	5000	5000	5000	5000
Revenue Sharing Scheme	400	2398	3996	5355	8394	8523
Promotions		3000	3000	3000	3000	3000
Income						
Grant	60000		40000		20000	
Sales: General Advertising	1998	11988	19980	26773	29970	26773
Sales: Targeted Advertising					12000	15840
Tip Jar Escrow Interest		42	47	53	86	52
Photography/Writing Brokerage	200	600	1000	1340	2000	2000
Cash Balance (cumulative)	23225	11310	46194	46858	71202	73164
Cost/Income Basis						
Daily unique visitors	1000	3000	5000	6700	10000	10000
Tip Jar system input	1,300	7,800	13000	17420	26000	26000

Notes: *Our target for financial sustainability is to grow unique visitors as shown over the three year period. Salaries are based on US Bureau of Labor Statistics 25% percentile regional pay, full time or 10 hours per week hourly pay rates. Office space, utilities, and web hosting sourced locally at stated rates. General advertising rates based on Google Adsense CPM rate estimate $3.33. Local "Targeted" advertising costed at $5.00 CPM.*

b. Major Project Activities.

1. Develop Site Framework

The news website presents local news in written, photo, and streaming video formats. Divided into sections much like traditional newspapers, it will feature additional refinements such as a robust search capacity. This provides grassroots, community based news otherwise unavailable to Asheville.

The community calendar functions as a resource for readers and a way for business and community groups to suggest events and concepts for coverage.

The business directory provides free listings for local businesses, which are linked to by articles referencing them. At the option of the listing holder, these can be featured on the directory page to provide a more complete resource for viewers who may be unfamiliar with the business previously.

The citizen journalist interface allows contributors to accept and develop stories, and volunteer as tutors for their field. Each contributor also has their own profile page, listing all their publications to the site.

The editor's desk interface for volunteer editors will list stories recently submitted for critique and publication. This process is anonymous, so as to prevent emotional bias affecting the quality of materials published on the site.

Forums will allow contributors to discuss difficulties or triumphs, to ask for help or to set up meetings, for example the tutoring of less experienced contributors.

Advertising space, initially filled through an ad service such as Google ads, later replaced by locally sourced ads. Contributors will earn 50% of the ad revenue for the pages on which their stories appear.

The tip jar system allows readers to make small donations to contributors as a way of showing appreciation for their work. The contributor can withdraw this money when it reaches a certain

amount, use it to tip others on the site, or donate to a local non-profit organization. This is a source of income but primarily it acts to foster community and positivity among site users.

Beta Launch opens the site to a limited number of local users and invites them to begin reading and participating in the site. Official launch after 3 months of beta development.

Employ and train Community Liaison who will act as both helpdesk to users and Executive Editor of the site. This person ensures the site's journalistic standards, through liaison with the volunteer editors, and also to acts as a central point of contact between the project and the community.

"Welcome to Citizen Journalism" events are promotional and educational events to introduce local residents to the project and explain the concept and system.

Apprenticeship Program, allowing those who have had at least one contribution to the site published to become Tutors to those who wish to learn more in their field.

School Publishing Platform allows classes to add their own reporting to the site via a system that allows teacher moderation of submissions, fostering current events awareness and media skills, while allowing students to make a real difference in their community.

Contributor Market, an automated system which allows contributors to set a price on their work for sale to other media and to the public. The site will claim a small percentage of profit on these transactions.

Employ part-time Marketing Director to promote local advertisements, Designer for ad development, and Programmer for minor site bugs and maintenance.

c. Outcome(s) and Measurements. The News Website provides exposure to local businesses, events, and non-profits, while growing media literacy and civic engagement in our region. Its community of contributors benefit through media skills education, networking, resume development, and extra income. The project employs one full-time and three part time staffers at the end of three years.

Measurement will take three forms. The first is automatic tracking of participation and readership. The second is sourced directly from contributors, readers, and local businesses and organizations including schools who use the site, through a bi-annual survey. Internal records include participation in and outcomes of the apprenticeship program; the contributor market; advertising and financial viability. This cumulative data reflects progress toward our goal of financial and qualitative sustainability. Financial sustainability is achieved at yearly gross income of $85500, which is projected at just under the 10000 unique daily visitors level. Qualitatively, the project's goal of being an essential community resource is marked at minimum 155 volunteer contributors giving average rotation of one new article per section per day. A bi-annual review will be conducted using all the information mentioned above and assessing progress toward these goals.

d. Schedule.

9/2011-12/2011	1/2012-3/2012	4/2012-10/2012	11/2012-5/2013	6/2013-12/2013	1/2014-9/2014
secure hosting	hire community liaison			hire and train programmer	hire marketing director & designer
build site w/all primary features	beta launch	public launch	enable apprenticeship program	enable contributor market	
	Welcome to CJ intro meetings		continue flyers, etc. & push for search results position		
	secure advertising				push for local ads
		first school section added	additional school sections added....		
	bug fixes, refinement		ongoing maintenance... >		

e. Partners. Rainbow Mountain Children's School and UNCA have expressed interest in having their students participating in this project. We will develop partnerships on a school by school basis.

f. The target community. Our target community is everyone with an interest in local news and events. The larger Asheville-area community benefits by having access to information about events and organizations in our area which might have escaped their notice, and potential visitors to the region can develop a better understanding of all we have to offer.

Direct involvement in reporting the news bridges cultural and generational gaps and engages people deeply in their locality. Through working together, peer review, and the apprenticeship program the project will also create a network of dedicated individuals united around the common cause of presenting a complete picture of our region's narrative. Because participation is open to anyone, many previously unheard voices may find they have a voice, and this community will help them develop it.

A number of community leaders have been invited to offer their opinions and suggestions on our proposal. The response has been overwhelmingly positive, and we are including a few statement excerpts here, though full statements can be viewed at http://ponderwell.net/cmdi-grant-testimonials/

"I believe the idea Ponderwell proposes merits your serious consideration and holds great potential for benefit to our community." -- Rep. Susan Fisher

"The idea of an organization focusing on community journalism represents an intelligent and forward-looking response to this difficult news environment. I am confident the structure outlined would create excellent internship opportunities for journalism and media students at UNC Asheville." -- Alan Hantz, Professor, Mass Communication, UNCA

"The Ponderwell project is a great idea and is exactly what Asheville needs. As the founder of the Urban Arts Institute I would love for our community to know about our programs and to understand the positive affect it has on our young people in underserved neighborhoods." -- Michael Hayes, Creative Director, Urban Arts Institute of WNC

"Ponderwell's proposal would give students opportunities to learn and develop skills in writing, technology, and a multitude of disciplines while providing a community service." ---Renee Owen, Executive Director, Rainbow Mountain Children's School

g. Communications. Coinciding with the beta launch period, we will organise several "Welcome to Citizen Journalism" events to promote the site in the community and particularly to potential contributors. Anyone attending the events will be invited to join the beta period of the site. To advertise these sessions, and continue to promote the site once it has been officially launched, we will advertise in the Mountain Xpress, place brochures at local libraries and businesses, and use grassroots promotion via our contacts with many local organisations which may have an interest, such as the Asheville Flickr group. We will also work to bring the site up to the number one position in search engines for key terms.

h. Documentation. Please refer to the "Outcomes and Measurements" section above. The following statistics will be collected automatically through website analytics and made available online within the site itself:

    1. Site visitors by news section and visitor approximate geographic location over time.
    2. Published news statistics by topic, date, and category.
    3. Visitor survey outcomes.

We will also collect bi-annual records of numbers of participating schools and students, participants in the apprenticeship program, success of tip jar culture, sales of advertising, and stories, photos and video sales brokered on behalf of contributors. A comprehensive review of progress in respect of project financial and other goals will be conducted every 6 months, and made available to stakeholders.