INNovation Fund Application Round 4 - Dec. 8, 2015

Submission Date	2015-12-08 19:29:33
Organization Name	TucsonSentinel.com
Tax-exempt status	Fiscally-sponsored project of 501(c)(3) organization
EIN of organization (or of fiscal sponsor's organization)	27-2614911
Website address	http://TucsonSentinel.com
Phone Number	(520) 271-8203
Applicant's name	Dylan Smith
Title:	Editor & Publisher
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Proposed Project Start Date	01-04-2016
Anticipated Project End Date	01-31-2017
Total estimated budget for the proposed project	53,300
Request amount from the INNovation Fund:	35,000
What is the total annual budget for your organization or, if you are a fiscally-sponsored project of another organization, the total annual budget for your fiscally-sponsored project.	120,000
In two or three sentences, describe your organization's purpose and audience.	A smarter Tucson is a better Tucson: TucsonSentinel.com, founded in 2009, is a nonprofit local independent online news organization that offers unbiased professional reporting and engaging community conversation.
	The ultimate mission of TucsonSentinel.com is to lead to a more informed community making wiser choices. A more immediate goal is to dampen rhetoric and foster a respectful dialogue about local and regional issues through solid, reliable journalism.
	Our growing audience includes community leaders and decision-makers, with readership spiking into the tens of thousands on heavy news days. In 2014, we had more than 1.4 million pageviews, and are on track to top that in 2015. We focus on engaging a core group who are passionate about knowing what's going on in Tucson.

Describe in detail the business experiment for which you are requesting funds. How does it fit with your sustainability plans? Explain the need for this project, and how you expect it to increase revenue and/or audience engagement.

THE VIEW FROM: Your Neighborhood

The problem: Residents with more awareness of what's going on around the world than across the street.

The solution: Provide tools to be used by already engaged community leaders to better inform their neighbors, through a small-scale pilot project to study their needs and develop a platform for neighborhood-level information.

In the simplest terms, we'll meet with those involved in neighborhood associations to learn how we can help them to help themselves know more about the concerns of those who live on their street.

We'll grow readership, increase the level of engagement with our audience, and leverage new sponsorship opportunities as we experiment with a platform for civic discourse.

DETAILS

The "View from/ Vista de" audience engagement project will see a diverse selection of community groups partner with TucsonSentinel.com's journalists and web developers to create a flexible platform for local communication.

The project will identify existing community information needs by collaborating on a pilot project with 6-10 of Tucson's 138 registered local neighborhood groups, and create a prototype local multi-channel news platform that's responsive to those challenges.

Rather than repeating the top-down assumptions that have hamstrung previous large-scale community blogging operations, we'll work directly with the leaders of Tucson's neighborhood associations to solicit feedback in a design thinking process. We'll enlist them in covering their own neighborhoods, and encouraging a respectful conversation about very local concerns.

The communications capabilities of those groups vary widely. Some neighborhoods have active blogs with a regular stream of posts, while most of the less-affluent areas don't have any presence online.

To determine the information needs of these groups in a more concrete way, we'll pick a representative selection of neighborhoods across the city of Tucson, keeping in mind demographic distributions of race and ethnicity, income, language and geography.

It's TucsonSentinel.com's founding principle that "a smarter Tucson is a better Tucson." And having residents who are engaged with their neighbors will foster more knowledgeable citizens and a better home for all of us in Southern Arizona.

After severe cuts to support offered to neighborhood associations over the past decade, the city of Tucson now only underwrites the mailing of a single four-page annual newsletter per association. A more active platform of communication is needed.

Neighbors should be able to easily find out if there's a rezoning hearing that affects them. When will that paving project finally reach their street? Will their water service be shut off next Tuesday because of repair work by city crews? How highly was the nearest elementary school rated by the state? There isn't one place to turn that paints a full picture of each segment of town.

VIEW FROM/VISTA DE

Reflecting the bilingual nature of metro Tucson (where some 30 percent of residents speak Spanish at home), we'll offer each neighborhood the choice of naming their section of the site as "The View From " or "Vista de la/del ": View from West University, Vista del Barrio Centro, View from Sam Hughes, Vista del Saguaro Miraflores, etc.

Our initial plans call for a custom blogging platform for the View/Vista project, with sections for each neighborhood, including events listings (community meetings, garage sales, pool schedules, road construction alerts), the ability to report community news, and the integration of relevant local data streams (crime reports, American Community Survey/Census data, school reviews).

However, we'll pay close attention to the expressed needs of neighborhood groups, and their ability to participate in what we see as a "community journalism" venture.

While "citizen journalism" hasn't taken wing in those areas where it's been tried, we believe that enlisting those who are already active in their communities to inform their neighbors will be an effective tactic. We wish to avoid both the "blogger with an axe to grind" problem, and the scatter-shot nature of much citizen journalism. We'll accomplish that by basing our project on organizations that are already active — and helping those groups that are somewhat dormant to be more effective.

By working with neighborhood associations, with their established roots, we'll better to able to sustain the project over the long term. In partnering with these organizations, rather than individuals, we expect to more readily weather the inevitable churn in volunteer participants. Neighborhood associations have a vested institutional interest in prompting informed change.

There are already many active neighborhood leaders, but there isn't a readily identifiable place online where residents know they can turn to for reliable information. We aim to change that.

The View/Vista section of TucsonSentinel.com will establish a secondary identity, and clearly differentiate community-based content from our professional news reporting.

In addition to the neighborhood-specific sections of our website, we'll set up and manage email newsletters, advise on social media outreach, and offer workshops on reporting best practices and how to use our content management system to each participating group.

The View/Vista project is part of an ongoing upgrade to our technology platform that will allow for more creative approaches to storytelling, more effective distribution and better recognition of donors and sponsors on mobile and tablets, easier fundraising appeals more integrated with our other information systems, and more extensive contributions from community leaders and experts.

The INNovation Fund grant will be targeted to support of direct outreach and engagement related to new community platforms, a part-time journalist working with neighborhood groups to facilitate quality content, the up-front costs for website development, and marketing to increase public awareness.

The View/Vista is oriented more toward the future than to immediate profits — it's our goal to involve readers as commenters and small donors, and recruit base-level small business sponsors, to build a broad base of support.

ENGAGEMENT DETAILS

We recognize that the ivory tower model of news reporting is no longer applicable — journalists must use both online and off-line methods of responding to readers.

While much of our technical planning over the past two years has centered on removing barriers to participation on our website by improving the commenting experience and social media integration, the View/Vista project will see us promoting engagement that isn't directly centered on our professional reporting.

As part of our ongoing effort to break down the walls between newsroom and audience, the basis of our plan is to provide a selected group from among Tucson's 138 recognized neighborhood associations with a blog, community calendar and a platform for a civic conversation. They will be encouraged to post community events and other neighborhood news. While several of the more wealthy associations have their own blogs already, most do not. The city of Tucson no longer provides much support for associations' postal newsletters, and we see a large gap to be filled. Our Engagement Editor will conduct outreach and training sessions to recruit neighborhood association leaders to blog as part of the project. We'll hire a part-time Neighborhood Reporter to facilitate coverage of local issues. We'll explore managing email lists for those associations, as well.

As we work out the details during our pilot project with 6-10 neighborhoods, we'll be open to feedback from other groups, and eventually to growing the project's reach across the city.

Expanding on the concept, we'll have the ability to provide leaders of community organizations, public officials and political candidates with an outlet for policy statements (with a careful eye peeled to avoid any electioneering).

REVENUE DETAILS

We strongly believe that local news organizations must be, in the long run, supported in a significant way by the communities they serve.

While grants — such the INNovation Fund support we're requesting — can provide the ability to build capacity, a sustainable news operation needs the support of local readers and businesses.

While the View/Vista project will provide an opportunity to increase readership through our publishing new content, it will also offer an expanded set of revenue opportunities through sponsorships.

In our underwriting pitch to local small businesses, we'll emphasize our responsive platform. Unlike other news websites in our market, we'll be able to prominently feature sponsorship banners across multiple devices. We'll also expand our underwriting opportunities with email campaigns and event sponsorships.

With the unique neighborhood focus of the View/Vista project, we'll be able to carefully target sponsorship acknowledgements for those underwriters looking for a scaled, low-cost alternative.

And perhaps most importantly, we have no plans to discourage readership by building a paywall, as Tucson's Lee/Gannett-owned daily newspaper has done.

To bolster revenues, we'll use our expanded website to redouble our efforts to sign local small businesses as sponsors of our work. By notably increasing our tight connection with the community, the View/Vista project will make underwriting our work an even more attractive prospect.

PROJECTED TIMELINE:

January 2016-January 2017

PHASE ONE - Outreach

Approximately 180 days

Set up technical development environment
Identify initial planning process participants
Hold planning and feedback meetings with neighborhood groups
Construct data architecture around identified needs
Design & code prototype View/Vista templates
User testing
Design and data structure iteration during review

Day 180 - 240

Design and code prototype public-facing View/Vista user interface
User testing & feedback
Data-gathering: Relevant data integrated into neighborhood pages
Hold system training sessions
Hold journalism training workshops
Engage further neighborhood groups as participants
Integrate association email newsletters with CMS
Identify and recruit sponsorship candidates

Day 240 - 270

Launch View/Vista publicly
Launch email newsletters
Outreach and marketing via radio, social media, public events
Assign Neighborhood Reporter to cover relevant events, write profiles, etc.

Day 270 - ongoing

Increase fundraising efforts, centered on local small business underwriting
Engagement: Public events
Expand neighborhood participants
Review information platform for potential improvements

Day 330 - ongoing

Review results: Community participation, audience engagement, revenue sustainability

SUMMARY

We project that an investment of $35,000 from the INNovation Fund will leverage a startup budget of about $53,000, including significant in-kind support for the View/Vista project.

Included are commitments of over $8,000 in PSAs to market our work, $2,500 in pro bono web services, and an estimated $1,500 in donated meeting space to accommodate feedback sessions and training workshops.

TucsonSentinel.com's View/Vista project will provide a foundation to more readily launch experiments in reporting and community engagement, while expanding our local revenue base. It will expose our professional journalism to more people both online and in person, while building a platform for already engaged local leaders to be more effective in their community-building work.

Which of the following statements best describes your proposed business experiment?	Principally an audience-driven project that will generate leads to convert and monetize in the future
Is this a new project?	New project. We have not done this before.

Who will help carry out the project? Describe the key staff and capabilities. If you plan to use outside partners, consultants, or vendors, tell us why you chose them (or how you will select them). Will you need to hire additional fulltime or part-time help to complete your proposed project?

Key staff will include:

Dylan Smith

TucsonSentinel.com's Editor and Publisher will lead the project, handling much of the initial design and coding work, working with city and county neighborhood development departments to solicit input and feedback, and making public and media appearances to elevate the View/Vista project's profile.

Smith is an experienced designer and programmer, and serves as an Invited Expert on the World Wide Web Consortium's HTML Working Group, helping to write the latest specification for the language that runs the Internet.

Before founding TucsonSentinel.com, he was the Online Editor for the Tucson Citizen, where he participated in numerous redesign projects, helped code three custom CMSs, and tripled online readership over three years.

He is the Chairman of the Board of Local Independent Online News Publishers, a member of Investigative Reporters and Editors and the Society of Professional Journalists, and serves on the board of the Arizona Press Club.

Maria Coxon-Smith

An experienced educator and former journalism instructor, Coxon-Smith is TucsonSentinel.com's News and Engagement Editor. She will increase her role on the engagement side, focused on recruiting and training neighborhood association leaders as View/Vista contributors, increasing reader involvement, and involving local government and community leaders in the project.

Neighborhood Reporter

A new part-time hire, the View/Vista Neighborhood Reporter will work on editing submitted items when necessary, postings of neighborhood events to an online To-Do Calendar, reporting and photography at selected community events, and performing interviews with notable neighborhood denizens.

Paul Ingram

TucsonSentinel.com's Border and Politics Reporter, also an experienced web developer, will tackle coding projects and perform data integrity checks on the system. He will also participate in public engagement events. Prior to his work with the Sentinel, Ingram was a reporter for Reuters and an editor for the University of Arizona's Biosphere 2.

Margie Wrye

An experienced radio broadcaster and event organizer, TucsonSentinel.com's new Business Development Manager will work with sponsorship partners to build an underwriting program for the project, and assist with holding in-person events during the planning stages.

Curtis Thompson

The news and Internet industry veteran, a senior developer with national travel industry publisher Madden Media, volunteers as a part-time News Editor for TucsonSentinel.com. For the View/Vista project, Thompson will be a paid design and coding consultant, focused on curating relevant information for each neighborhood. Thompson served on both the editorial and advertising sides of several local independent publications, as well as the production side of Tucson Newspapers Inc. He began developing websites in the mid-1990s, became a skilled back-end coder working with several Bay Area/Silicon Valley startups, and is the holder of three user interface patents covering presentation and display of large data sets.

Travis Smith

The president the web development firm Hop Studios (Vancouver, B.C.), Smith is an expert on ExpressionEngine, the CMS that powers TucsonSentinel.com. In addition to design and coding expertise, Smith helped launch the Los Angeles Times website in 1995, worked for Online Journalism Review and was the editor of Variety.com before launching Hop Studios in 2004.

Hop Studios has worked on a number of media sites, including Truthdig, Noozhawk.com, J-Lab, Knight Digital Media Center, and Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics. Smith and his team will consult on web development for the project, including user interfaces for View/Vista contributors, and ensuring the security of public input forms.

John Kiniston

Kiniston is a system administrator who has years of experience managing online operations for two daily newspapers. Kiniston is now working with Simply Bits, the local Internet communications company that provides pro bono web services to the Sentinel. He keeps TucsonSentinel.com's web server, email server and other infrastructure humming happily, 24-7. In addition to his ongoing work for the Sentinel, including overseeing an upgrade of our web server, Kiniston will assist with systems testing and security for the View/Vista project.

In addition to these key personnel, the project will rely on frequent volunteer work at public events. Other paid consultants and freelance workers will be tasked as required.

| **How will you measure progress? Please be specific and concrete about the metrics you will use? Suggestion: Keep the number of suggested metrics limited and make sure that they are actually measuring the results of the proposed business experiment.** | While there are many ways to measure online success, we'll be focusing on our ability to involve the local community in our work, as we believe our long-term success relies on reader involvement. Specifically for the View/Vista project, we'll look at the number of neighborhood association leaders signed up to participate, the frequency of their postings, and the readership for the project.

We'll track the project over several metrics:

Number of neighborhood groups involved in planning/feedback
Number of neighborhood group leaders trained in posting
Number of postings by neighborhood groups
Direct readership, and social media exposure for View/Vista postings

As a project meant to expand TucsonSentinel.com's revenue potential, we'll also of course be tracking local sponsorships directed toward the project.

We will provide breakdowns on all of those points quarterly, beginning after the launch of the View/Vista project. |
|---|---|
| **Using those metrics, how will you know you have succeeded in meeting the objectives for the business experiment. Please be as specific as possible.** | Success for the View/Vista project will be assessed at three different points:

Outreach: Do we involve a statistically significant fraction of Tucson's 130-odd neighborhood groups in providing feedback on the information needs that they could help fill? We'll look to engage at least 10 distinct groups in some manner during the planning process.

Implementation: What percentage of initially involved groups are trained and begin posting? How many other groups become involved during the initial phase of the project? Our goal is to have 5 active participating associations during the project's roll-out, posting at least three items weekly, each.

Impact: How many read View/Vista postings? How many spread published information via social media? Does the project lead to increased awareness of TucsonSentinel.com as a whole, as well as an increase in funding to support the project and our organization?

Ultimately, we'll determine if the level of readership, available funding, and work involved in running the project make it viable to continue over the long term.

What we'll look for:

In the first six months after rollout, an aggregate of at least 10 weekly postings by neighborhood leaders, with overall readership over 1,000 weekly. After six months, our goal is 15 weekly posts, augmented by work by our Neighborhood Reporter.

Over the course of the first year, our goal will be to reach $1,000 monthly in direct sponsorships for the project, and lay the groundwork for expanding the number of participating groups. |
| **How will INN be able to validate the metrics and how the project did using those metrics?** | Validation by INN will be simple: direct observation of public posting activity, as reported by TucsonSentinel.com, along with tracking financial support in its role as the fiscal sponsor for the Sentinel. |

What do you hope to learn from this project, and how do you hope to apply what you've learned over the long term?	The hypothesis we'll test is that there is a fruitful middle ground between failed notions of "citizen journalism" and the old-fashioned ivory tower model of journalism — what we see as "community journalism."
	Other experiments have shown that relying on ordinary citizens (those without political axes to carefully hone, which is a different 55-gallon drum of worms) to report on their communities doesn't work — they've not been sustainable as journalism nor as businesses.
	We'll determine if coupling purposefully designed tools with citizens who are already active, assisted by experienced journalists and backed by a focused fundraising campaign, will help fill the serious information gaps we see in a sprawling metro area.
	The View/Vista set of structured neighborhood blogs is an outgrowth of TucsonSentinel.com's Lookout Project — an ongoing groundup revamp of our technology base, including a large upgrade to our CMS.
	It's our goal that in providing a pilot group of local neighborhood associations (and, looking to the future, charities and public agencies) the ability to communicate outside their normal silos, we will create a more knowledgeable community, and also increase the audience for our professional local reporting.
	The project includes at its heart an iterative planning process: directly engaging neighborhood leaders in identifying information needs, and building a platform that's responsive to them. Rather than being based on top-down assumptions, we'll work with local groups using design thinking principles to solve real-world communication problems as we further our goal of living in a better-informed community.
	Surveying readers and local leaders with questions about our reporting, our website and our community's information needs will position us to make both editorial and business decisions, as well as providing data that will be valuable in approaching sponsors.
Why are you the right organization and team to do this project?	Entering our sixth year of full-time publishing, TucsonSentinel.com has a growing reputation — both locally and nationally — for providing high-quality, balanced reporting on Southern Arizona. Our team include experienced journalists and technologists, several of whom will take part in the View/Vista project.
	We have team members with extensive abilities in web design and coding as it relates to reporting, and are looking to outside partners who will help us complete the web development portion of the project quickly and effectively.
	Working with Hop Studios will allow us to take advantage of their deep knowledge of using ExpressionEngine's flexible information architecture to develop news and information platforms.
	As a growing news organization in a metro area where other outlets have drastically cut their staffs (there are some 200 fewer journalists in Tucson than there were just a few years ago), we're uniquely positioned to partner with neighborhood stakeholders to create a platform to help better inform local residents.
	We'll use the lessons of the past, and involve local associations early in the planning and development process, to give them the tools they need to build a more engaged citizenry.
	Further, as a member of both the Institute for Nonprofit News and Local Independent Online News Publishers, we're well-positioned to share what we learn with a diverse set of news organizations across the country.

How is this project similar/different than other projects you've researched ahead of this proposal? What can you learn that is different from what others have already tried?	Over the years, we've all seen a wave of "citizen journalism" projects in other cities run out of steam — those efforts seemed to be an unnatural construct. Participants were inconsistent in the coverage of issues, and often quickly ran out of steam. That led organizations to constantly have to train new CJs on the basics, rather than helping them improve their work.
	Contrasting with the attempt to train inexperienced individuals with wavering commitments to act as professional-level reporters, we'll try a different tack: Give community leaders who are already engaged the tools to engage with their local neighborhoods.
	Rather than imposing a training regimen ("here's how to be a reporter for us"), we'll work with them to determine what their information needs are, and how we can work together to fill them. We'll ask those who are already informed, and motivated to inform others, what will help them build a more effective civic conversation. And we'll provide training in specific local resources: which government databases hold what information, etc.
	We've already had a number of informal conversations with leaders of neighborhood groups, but need to invest in the dedicated time to discuss prototype solutions.
	We've seen a few instances of design thinking applied to the journalist/audience relationship, but not one that has directly applied the process to an audience's relationship with itself.
	As each neighborhood has different challenges and opportunities — an impoverished South Side plot of ranch homes dealing with systemic pollution is far different than an upscale Midtown neighborhood with ready access to City Hall — we may well develop a suite of tools to be applied as appropriate.
Why is this project timely? Why is now a good time to undertake this project?	The View/Vista project has been at the core of our planning our website revamp over the past two years.
	Given the dramatic cuts in support for local neighborhood groups, including the virtual elimination of communications funding by the city of Tucson, we see a hole that needs filling. The View/Vista's first phase is a highly shovel-ready project; we just need the investment of an INNovation Fund grant to provide the capacity to fulfill our plans.
	Following on a contentious municipal election, a series of court challenges to Tucson's election system is ongoing. A set of proposed changes to the city charter may be sent to voters next year. Considering that, a healthy civic conversation that relects the views of individual citizens will be more important than ever.
	Additionally, the recent implementation of an online paywall by Tucson's chain-run daily newspaper creates an opportunity to build further awareness of our work and our close connection to the community.
Upload your project budget	INNovation-Fund-Project-Budget-TucsonSentinel-12-15.xlsx