

INNOVATION Fund Application Round 4 - Dec. 8, 2015

<b>Submission Date</b>	2015-12-08 10:27:14
<b>Organization Name</b>	VTDigger.org
<b>Tax-exempt status</b>	501(c)(3) organization
<b>EIN of organization (or of fiscal sponsor's organization)</b>	27-1553931
<b>Website address</b>	<a href="http://www.vtdigger.org">http://www.vtdigger.org</a>
<b>Phone Number</b>	(802) 225-6224
<b>Applicant's name</b>	Diane Zeigler
<b>Title:</b>	VTDigger Podcast
<b>Contact email</b>	zig@vtdigger.org
<b>Proposed Project Start Date</b>	01-01-2016
<b>Anticipated Project End Date</b>	01-01-2017
<b>Total estimated budget for the proposed project</b>	75,000
<b>Request amount from the INNOVATION Fund:</b>	35,000
<b>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.</b>	1,100,000
<b>In two or three sentences, describe your organization's purpose and audience.</b>	VTDigger publishes rigorous journalism that explains complex issues, holds government accountable to the public, and engages Vermonters in the democratic process. Our purpose is to provide in-depth news, analysis and investigative reports that explain how decisions made by state officials impact Vermonters. We have an audience of 135,000 to 150,000 unique readers a month who represent a cross-section of people with different political views and socioeconomic situations.

**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 project will test the premise that an established online news organization can use branded podcasts to expand news coverage sustained by underwriting, event sponsorship and resale of podcasts to radio stations.

VTDigger has well-developed, highly diversified funding sources from membership, events, large donors, foundations, underwriters and news revenue from media partnerships. All of these funding streams were developed to support our daily news and investigative reporting published in online-only format. The diversified funding streams we have developed have allowed us to publish thousands of news stories about Vermont - stories that held politicians to account and had a direct impact on legislative action.

The internet has forever altered the traditional model of daily journalism and the way people get their news. VTDigger was founded to fill this void in Vermont news coverage. We are the only statewide news organization that has successfully demonstrated that daily journalism can thrive on a digital-only platform.

We are now ready to expand our coverage to include a branded podcast.

Podcasts have become a popular medium for news. Audio interviews and spoken analysis are distinctly different from the written form and offer information in a format that can be accessed on-demand by an increasingly mobile news consumer.

With seed funding from INN, VTDigger proposes to produce, launch and promote a weekly podcast. The VTDigger Podcast will provide listeners with new content, will increase underwriting support, enhance our partnerships with local newspapers and radio stations, and create a new revenue stream for the organization.

**Which of the following statements best describes your proposed business experiment?**

Principally a revenue-generating project that is part of a larger revenue-generation plan

**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?**

The VTDigger Podcast host will be the organization's newest hire, Senior Reporter and Editor Mark Johnson. Johnson is a well-respected Vermont journalist and for 25 years hosted a popular political talk show on the radio. His live program featured daily interviews with Vermont newsmakers and call-in questions from listeners. His specialty is the Terry Gross style interview: he can make difficult sources sing. His radio program was podcast daily.

Since joining VTDigger in October, Johnson has added audio interviews to supplement his reporting at VTDigger; examples can be found here: <http://vtdigger.podbean.com/>. This project, however, will offer readers a new, fully branded, weekly VTDigger podcast with Johnson as the interviewer.

In addition to Podbean, the show will also be available through iTunes for automatic subscriptions.

We propose to feature Johnson's experience as a broadcaster and audio journalist to create a series of weekly podcasts covering issues during the five-month Vermont legislative session and the 2016 campaigns. Vermont's political season is fully underway and features an open seat for governor and lieutenant governor. In addition, Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders is running a robust race for president. The upcoming legislative session is expected to feature an array of lightning rod issues, a carbon emissions tax, possible repeal of the state's new controversial education law, as well as efforts to legalize marijuana.

VTDigger's Publisher Diane Zeigler and Director of Underwriting Theresa Murray Clasen will play an important role in the project by performing outreach to businesses to secure underwriting for the VTDigger Podcast. We plan to sell the podcast as a premium product both for annual underwriting support as well as individual program support. It will also be sold to media partners for rebroadcast on radio and online, as part of our ongoing collaboration with other media partners.

In this way, the VTDigger Podcast will be a valuable new revenue source and a new technical offering for a media outlet specializing in online-only news. Fifty percent of VTDigger's current funding is derived from traditional banner advertising on the site; audio content will provide a much-needed new funding stream from underwriters.

Technical staff to edit and post audio for the VTDigger podcast will also be needed for the project. Business staff will also support the project by marketing it on the website, email and social VTDigger platforms.

**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.**

Progress will be measured by the amount underwriting support raised for the podcast as a new media product on the VTDigger platform.

The number of users who download or stream the podcast and the number of subscriptions to the podcast will also be important metrics for measurement of success, engagement, and relevance to consumers of Vermont news.

The number of social shares and the number of rebroadcast/syndication outlets will also be used as measurements.

**Using those metrics, how will you know you have succeeded in meeting the objectives for the business experiment. Please be as specific as possible.**

The VTDigger Podcast provides an opportunity to use podcasting technology to enhance each of the revenue sources we've successfully developed to date via sales, membership, media partnerships and events. The podcast will support the membership campaign outreach schedule. It can diversify revenue with a new premium offering for underwriters. It will also support the VTDigger events platform with podcasts that cover the topics discussed at live events, which will further enhance underwriting interest in the events platform.

**How will INN be able to validate the metrics and how the project did using those metrics?**

VTDigger will provide INN with technical reporting from its social, website and podcasting providers.

**What do you hope to learn from this project, and how do you hope to apply what you've learned over the long term?**

We hope to learn that podcasting is both an accessible technology and form of journalism that our audience is primed to patronize. Interviewing for audio consumption is also a skill that other VTDigger reporters can learn. Having an experienced radio interviewer at the helm can enhance the skillsets of reporters trained in the traditional written-form approach. We anticipate that the VTDigger Podcast will strengthen the news organization's business model and further demonstrate to other outlets a pathway to sustainability that can be replicated elsewhere.

**Why are you the right organization and team to do this project?**

VTDigger started first with investigative news, offered online with primarily written-word and occasional audio/video supplements to news stories. VTDigger's web platform is now fully developed as are its underwriting and membership funding channels. It's now time to enhance our news coverage by offering our site visitors more robust multimedia.

Here's why a podcast is particularly relevant for consumers of Vermont news. Many areas of Vermont and bordering regions do not have cell service or adequate access to radio broadcasts. For the thousands of rural Vermonters who commute to work, the practice of downloading podcasts is increasingly popular.

Smart-phone users are in the habit of listening to podcasts while on the move, and audio provides an additional and valuable communications platform for our investigative work as a news organization.

Having secured an experienced, skilled interviewer, the organization is well-poised to brand and launch a podcast that will be popular with Vermont news consumers.

**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?**

What's different about this project is that while we are in tremendous need of seed funding from INN to launch it, we have great confidence that it will be self-sustaining. There are certainly other project ideas that we've ended up shelving due to either lack of seed funding or uncertainty about whether new funding sources would support them. This project is different in that we are certain we will secure matching underwriting support for it once we are able to prove the concept.

This project has a low level of risk and a high probability of success. A VTDigger Podcast will strengthen an area of our news operation that has already been tested and has proven ready for further enhancement. This is an approach to growth that we have taken before. For example, when we applied and received a successful grant for a news publisher from the EEIJ Foundation, it was because that project was the next logical step in our growth. We had a demonstrated proof of concept: the reporting was there, the readership was there, the interest was there. What was missing at that stage was the strengthening of the business model of support in the form of a publisher position.

The launch of the VTDigger Podcast is, similarly, a next logical step in providing comprehensive news coverage. We have two legs up on making the project a success: We have a well-known, experienced broadcaster at the helm, and an established audience ready to patronize the product.

**Why is this project timely? Why is now a good time to undertake this project?**

First, VTDigger now has the technical infrastructure to support a podcast. Second, our underwriters are eager for new outreach opportunities to support with their advertising dollars. Third, we already have chosen our podcasting sources and editing technologies. Finally, with notoriously unreliable cell phone towers in rural Vermont, we know our audience is already in the practice of downloading podcasts on mobile devices, especially in a geographical region heavily dependent on automobile transport and intermittent mobile coverage.

**Upload your project budget**

[INNovation-Fund-Project-Budget-Template.xlsx](#)