Board of County Commissioners
Agenda Request

Aitkin County

6A
Agenda Item #

Requested Meeting Date: May 26, 2015

Title of Item: Aitkin County Web Diagnostics for Small Business Owners

☑ REGULAR AGENDA	**Action Requested:**	☐ Direction Requested
☐ CONSENT AGENDA	☑ Approve/Deny Motion	☐ Discussion Item
☐ INFORMATION ONLY	☐ Adopt Resolution (attach draft)	☐ Hold Public Hearing*
		provide copy of hearing notice that was published

Submitted by:	**Department:**
Ross Wagner	Economic Development & Forest Ind

Presenter (Name and Title):	**Estimated Time Needed:**
Ross Wagner, Economic Development & Forest Industry Coordinator	20 minutes

Summary of Issue:

I am requesting that we implement the Aitkin County Web Diagnostics for Small Business Owners, overview and application form are attached. By using funds returned to the county when the Minnesota Community Capital Fund dissolved and matching funds of 75% from the Blandin Foundation, Aitkin County would offer up to 4 free hours of web consulting for our businesses that are looking for that service. Total cost of the program is $5,250 which would require $1,312.50 from the County and $3,937.50. The unique feature of this program is it would bring a technician right to the business giving hands on training and instructions on the businesses own computer or equipment. Services offered to the businesses are similar to those offered through the MN Extension Service but in a classroom setting with a social media for businesses element added.

With the increasing use of devices for shopping, making reservations or exploring the area, are our businesses up and ready for this challenge? Social Media such as Facebook is increasingly used for business advertising and promotions, we need to be onboard. This program would be a small investment by the county to insure that our businesses have access to the information to keep them competitive in today's ever changing web environment.

Alternatives, Options, Effects on Others/Comments:

Recommended Action/Motion:

Approve funding the program with $1,312.50 from the Minnesota Community Capital Fund and apply to the Blandin Foundation for a matching grant of $3,937.50

Financial Impact:

Is there a cost associated with this request? ☑ Yes ☐ No

What is the total cost, with tax and shipping? $

Is this budgeted? ☐ Yes ☑ No   Please Explain:

Legally binding agreements must have County Attorney approval prior to submission.

Aitkin County Web Diagnostics for Small Business Owners
Overview

Aitkin County has partnered with the Hill City Chamber of Commerce and the McGregor Chamber of Commerce to provide web based training for local businesses. "Roadside Advertising in a Digital Age" was offered in Hill City and McGregor by the MN Extension Service. Attendance was small but enthusiastic. Both I and the Chamber Directors were pleased with the programs and received positive feedback from the business community. Since it is difficult to get folks out in the evenings and away from the office from to work on their web presence, the Aitkin County Web Diagnostic Program would bring these tools to the business.

Concept: Provide up to 4 hours of free web consulting for businesses located in Aitkin County. This service would be tailored to web location services such as Google and yelp, basics of Search Engine Optimization (SEO), using web analytics and social media. If a business is already using these services the program would provide an update or refresher session to make sure the business is utilizing these web tools to their maximum capacity. The person doing the web diagnostics would not be a web designer or provide content for a business's website. However, within the 4 hours of time, basic instructions on starting, designing and hosting a website would be allowable.

Funding: There are a couple of sources to fund the program, the University of MN Community Assistantship Program (CAP) and the Blandin Foundation Broadband Grant Programs. Both require a local financial match. The UMN Regional Sustainable Development Partnership would be another possibility, though this type of project may not be in their focus area. The funding that is available should cover 125 hours of "consulting" time including travel at $30.00/hr. or $3,750.00 plus an additional $1,000.00 for mileage and meals. Program advertising and awareness through advertisements in the local papers and perhaps a mailing is estimated at $500.00 for a total cost of $5,250.00. Aitkin County could provide a local match of $1,312.50 from the Community Capital Fund funds returned to the county when the MCCF dissolved.

Availability: Any new or existing business located in Aitkin County including home based businesses. With 125 hours available, over 30 businesses could receive this service. According to the Aitkin County Demographic & Economic Profile, there are 453 firms in Aitkin County, 1,150 non-employer 'firms" and 471 farms with 192 farms with farming as their primary occupation. Businesses would be awarded the Web Diagnostics on a first come first serve basis, however a geographical spread could be considered.

Aitkin County Web Diagnostics for Small Business Owners
Application Form

Business Name: _____

Contact: _____

Phone, e-mail: _____

Address: _____

State Business ID#: _____

Brief Description of what you want to do, check boxes below: _____

_____

Through the Aitkin County Web Diagnostics for Small Business Owners, any business located in Aitkin County is eligible to receive up to 4 hours of free, web based marketing assistance.
Guidelines:

- The program provides up to 4 hours of free consultation on web based marketing or social media. Specific areas of assistance that is available through the program are listed below.
- You may check any and all programs you feel most beneficial to your business, however, the 4 hour time limit applies, so be sure to prioritize the assistance you are looking for.
- Aitkin County estimates that approximately 31 businesses will be able to receive this free assistance, if there is sufficient demand, we will look at the program again in 2016.

This service would be tailored to web location services such as Google and yelp, basics of Search Engine Optimization (SEO), using web analytics and social media. If a business is already using these services the program would provide an update or refresher session to make sure the business is utilizing these web tools to their maximum capacity. The person doing the web diagnostics would not be a web designer or provide content for a business's website. However, within the 4 hours of time, basic instructions on starting, designing and hosting a website would be allowable.

- _____ Managing online Reviews
  - o Managing an online presence is now an essential business practice. This includes monitoring and responding to reviews posted on social media sites such as Yelp and Trip Advisor.

- _____ Mobile eMarketing
  - o Mobile devices like iPhones and Androids generate the bulk of internet traffic now. Having a mobile version of a business website and being accessible through multiple mobile search engines is considered essential by many businesses.

- _____ Location based services
  - o From Google Maps to Yelp, people now rely on location based services to find goods and services.

- _____ Getting high on Google (search engine optimization)

- o Getting to the top of Google's search results is a marketing priority of many businesses. Making sure that your website represents all that your business has to offer is the primary way to get the top search rankings.

- _____ Using analytics to inform business decisions
  - o Analytics is the recorded data of how many visitors come to your website, what pages they went to, and what content they engaged with. Most business websites have analytic data available for the website but do not have a clear idea of how to use it to make decisions.

- _____ Social media for business
  - Facebook, many who have Facebook business pages or a Twitter account struggle to make good use of them. Explore strategies and tactics small businesses are using to engage with customers using social media. Small businesses are increasingly, successfully using social media to engage with the customers and improving their bottom line.
  - o Branding is an area where some businesses could use assistance – or just advice on being consistent across all their social media and web outlets with logos and messaging. Another possible service to consider would be video marketing -- a lot of smaller companies can use YouTube videos to drive traffic to their websites.