

LocalWiki.net

1. What is your project?

LocalWiki.net is the free, universally-accessible collection of the world's local knowledge. It provides a simple and engaging way for neighbors to learn, share and collaborate with their local community; acts as a repository for both structured and unstructured local information; and supplies a global, universal platform for developers to build upon.

As the next logical phase of our LocalWiki project, LocalWiki.net will provide a lightweight, frictionless way to collaborate, share and learn without the technical or logistical challenges associated with creating an independent LocalWiki instance. It will comprise a website that supports easy collaborative editing, a structured database of places, people, events, knowledge and folklore, and an open API for querying and updating this database.

LocalWiki.net will provide an open, participatory platform for local, geographic knowledge upon which countless civic and locally-relevant applications will be built. In the same way that OpenStreetMap and Wikipedia have transformed the way we think about maps and encyclopedias, LocalWiki.net aims to change the way we relate to and engage with local knowledge.

2. Who will use it?

LocalWiki.net will find immediate adoption by the many individuals, organizations and communities in our large LocalWiki network. We know that there are thousands more who want to participate but for whom starting an independent LocalWiki project is too big of a hurdle. Using LocalWiki.net, these people will be able to jump in and immediately start collaborating with their neighbors.

We expect other early adopters of LocalWiki.net will be free culture geeks, open-content enthusiasts, and civic-minded individuals. Almost all successful open source projects (e.g. Wikipedia, Linux, OpenStreetMap) owe their initial growth to dyed-in-the-wool geeks and free culture activists. As such, our initial focus will be on nurturing this early community.

After the initial buildup period, LocalWiki.net content will increasingly start showing up in search results, and it will be used by individuals, community groups, cities, journalists, and others as a reference and a way to interact with the community.

At the same time, LocalWiki.net will be used as a read/write platform for local, geographic knowledge. LocalWiki.net will power applications built to solve specific problems, like community resource directories, restaurant inspection catalogs, events calendars, and location-aware smart assistants similar to Siri¹.

As LocalWiki.net's coverage of communities improves, we envision people relying on it for a variety of everyday tasks from casual browsing and searching, to civic discussions, to massively collaborative projects that improve community life.

3. Why do you think they need it?

Community information hubs

In 2009, the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy released a report consisting of 15 recommendations for creating more informed communities. Recommendation 15 was to “Ensure that every local community has at least one high-quality online hub.” By and large, local communities still do not have such a hub, and we believe LocalWiki.net is the right approach to helping communities build high-quality local online hubs. And we are not alone. A 2001 Aspen Institute white paper on Recommendation 15 entitled “Creating Local

¹ Apple's Siri “smart assistant” currently pulls the majority of its local data from Yelp.

Online Hubs: Three Models for Action”, cited the LocalWiki project as one of the models for realizing the Knight Commission’s recommendation and said of the Davis Wiki:

“It is an amazing compendium of useful, user generated information about the community’s history, culture, government, schools, activities and much more. The Davis Wiki site offers almost everything the authors of the Informing Communities report hoped for when they drew up the seven key ingredients for any local online hub listed in Recommendation 15.”

LocalWiki.net would make this proven model immediately available to thousands of communities around the world.

Open database of places

A database of places is extremely useful. It ties a business or point of interest with its geographic location and other structured data, allowing for a huge number of applications. Many companies, including Google, Yelp, Twitter, Facebook, Foursquare, and others have been building private geographic databases for use in their own products. This is a tremendous waste of duplicated efforts, and worse, a barrier to innovation by smaller companies and developers. A 2010 TechCrunch article by Erick Schonfeld declared "It's Time For An Open Database Of Places" (<http://techcrunch.com/2010/04/17/open-database-places/>). "A truly open database of places should allow both give and take," Schonfeld writes. "It should be one that everyone can contribute to and nobody necessarily owns. Foursquare should be able to update it as easily as Twitter or Google, or any other Geo startup. The best data should prevail." LocalWiki.net matches this description perfectly—and goes far beyond, integrating not only places but people, things, events, community folklore, services, and more.

Creative outlet

Author Clay Shirky writes about the "cognitive surplus" that results when people spend some of their free time creating and collaborating with others, which makes hugely valuable works like Wikipedia possible. People want to use their free time to connect with others and contribute to something meaningful, but there are surprisingly few outlets for this creative surplus that are both meaningful and accessible to everyone. Contributing to a Wikipedia article, for instance, requires a relatively high level of expertise in the given subject, not to mention the technical expertise for using the Wikipedia software, which few people have. But our local communities are one place where every local is an expert! LocalWiki.net offers a unique, rewarding creative outlet that benefits your community. It uses people's existing knowledge (of the place they live) and skills (writing, photography, mapping, socializing, organizing, coding, etc.) to create lasting value and foster civic participation.

4. Describe a real world scenario in which people would use your project.

Cindy has just moved to Olympia, Washington, and wants to volunteer some of her time to a local nonprofit. She goes to LocalWiki.net, types "volunteer" into the search field, and gets back a list of organizations with volunteering opportunities in Olympia. Using the built-in map, she looks up a few of them near her home, reads more about them, and finds their contact information, all without leaving LocalWiki.net.

Mark writes a blog about the parks and greenways in Raleigh, NC, but he only has a small audience and he wants to reach more of his community. He finds Raleigh on LocalWiki.net and starts creating pages and maps based on his writings. Samantha, an active local contributor, finds Mark's pages and creates links to other relevant pages. Mark's writings have now been enriched without him doing any additional work, and

– as part of a cohesive collection of local knowledge – will get far more exposure than they did on their own.

Code for America is hosting a hackathon in Austin, TX, and encourages teams to use the LocalWiki.net API. One team makes a website that analyzes news stories from the Austin Chronicle and adds links to related LocalWiki.net pages, so you can learn more about the people and places the stories mention. Another team creates an iPhone app that tells you when you are near something that doesn't yet have a photo in LocalWiki.net so you can post one. A third team imports a large collection of GIS data from the city into LocalWiki.net, including bike routes, greenways, and historical landmarks, making them searchable and putting them on the map. Because the teams used LocalWiki.net as their platform, they did not have to design their own databases or APIs, and their apps will work everywhere, with little or no tweaking.

5. What is your plan for making your project known and accessible to the people who you expect to use it?

Through our website, blog, social media, and mailing lists, we are in touch with thousands of people who are involved or interested in the LocalWiki project and are eager to help us spread the word. We will publish regular updates to let them know about the new LocalWiki.net initiative. Collectively, the existing LocalWiki projects reach an audience of over 380,000 individuals every month.

Our hands-on community outreach program will target specific communities for promoting LocalWiki.net, raising awareness, helping organize meetups and hackathons around contributing to LocalWiki.net, observing real world usage, and listening to feedback about how we can make it even more accessible to everyone. In our experience with LocalWiki, many people are so enthusiastic that they are happy to represent the project in their community and beyond – the kind of endorsement that money simply can't buy. Our outreach efforts will focus on building exactly this sort of impassioned, scalable volunteer community.

Additionally, we will get the word out through our network of partners such as Code for America and Wikipedia, and create new partnerships through targeted outreach to groups such as the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership, public libraries and social service organizations.

6. Please list who is on your team.

The Localwiki.net project will be led by the existing LocalWiki team and global volunteer network. The project will be directed by Philip Neustrom and Mike Ivanov.

Philip Neustrom is co-founder and Executive Director of LocalWiki, co-founder of Davis Wiki. Prior to the LocalWiki project, Philip worked in the online organizing space as Lead Developer at Citizen Engagement Lab, where he worked to use technology to empower and engage traditionally underrepresented communities. Mike Ivanov is co-founder of LocalWiki and DavisWiki, formerly an Engineer at Xerox PARC.

7. What connections have you made or do you plan to make with others (communities, organizations or networks) about your project?

- **Existing networks:** Our existing network of LocalWiki projects and interested individuals, going back many years (since 2004), and reaching hundreds of thousands of individuals will form the initial basis for the project.
- **Code for America:** We have a close partnership with Code for America and are working with them on their Brigade initiative and in a few fellowship cities. LocalWiki.net will give us an opportunity to further expand this partnership.

- **Wikimedia Foundation:** We've worked with the Wikimedia Foundation on planning around certain shared technical and community problems. We plan to work with them more directly as LocalWiki.net moves forward to develop functionality like automatic cross-linking between Wikipedia and LocalWiki.net.
- **OpenPlans:** We have worked with OpenPlans on shared technical infrastructure (most notably the OpenBlock team). With LocalWiki.net we hope to broaden our collaboration, as OpenPlans could make use of the LocalWiki.net platform in a number of their initiatives.
- **OpenStreetMap & Open Source Geospatial Foundation:** A number of OpenStreetMappers and members of the Open Source Geospatial Foundation are involved with the LocalWiki project, and we hope to work closely with the OSM and OSGeo communities as LocalWiki.net develops. As a concrete example of possible collaboration, we want to create a set of standardized annotations for OpenStreetMap to facilitate pushing/pulling data between our projects.
- **CityCamps & Civic Hackathons:** LocalWiki is increasingly being used during civic hackathons, both as a tool to hack on and as a way for non-developers to contribute. For example, at the recent "Code for Oakland" Hackathon in Oakland, CA there was a group of more than 30 people working together on an Oakland LocalWiki project¹. With LocalWiki.net we expect to broaden this appeal by providing an immediately available, global platform.
- **API & Platform consumers:** A number of groups have begun developing apps targeting the existing LocalWiki API. We will work with these organizations, as well as other potential API consumers, to develop a platform that's immediately useful to a wide range of organizations and use-cases.

¹ <http://localwiki.org/blog/2012/jul/25/july-awesomeness/>

- **Public libraries:** We have enthusiastic interest from a number public libraries, many of which are spearheading LocalWiki projects for their communities.
- **Reddit and other global-local networks:** We plan to make extensive use of existing global-local online networks. For instance, *Reddit.com* has a vast number of active, interesting “subreddits” dedicated to local communities throughout the US. Existing LocalWiki communities have had success promoting and partnering with administrators of these local “subreddits” and we plan to expand these efforts with LocalWiki.net.

8. What feedback have you received from potential users or partners about the idea?

Making it easier to start and contribute to projects is the most requested improvement that users of LocalWiki have suggested. “I want this to exist *everywhere*” is a wish we hear over and over from our users. Starting a LocalWiki project currently takes a small but not insignificant investment of time and a hosting infrastructure, and many potential contributors are asking us to make this step easier.

An open, universally accessible database and platform for local knowledge has broad appeal. Even within our existing LocalWiki community, many have asked for functionality that this platform will deliver, such as: How do I target multiple LocalWiki instances’ APIs from a mobile phone application? How should different, potentially intersecting geographic areas be represented as LocalWiki instances?

There is tremendous interest in using the LocalWiki.net project as a sort of generic backend to various civic applications and initiatives. We have received extremely positive feedback from some of our partners at Code for America who are excited about LocalWiki.net as a read/write platform for a plethora of civic applications. Matt Hampel, a Code for America fellow, tells us:

“There isn’t an easy way to store structured, geographically-based information about a place... We’d [love to] build on top of an open, interconnected system that makes life easy. There are lots of related app ideas we’d love to explore with that technical foundation.”

There is interest in using LocalWiki.net as a platform for compiling and querying essential social service directory information. We’ve been working with social service organizations in Richmond, CA (Building Blocks for Kids Collaborative); Washington, DC (Bread for the City); and Oakland, CA (Urban Strategies Council and other groups) on ways we can build the future LocalWiki.net platform to best accommodate these needs. In particular, a number of groups are interested in using LocalWiki.net as the basis for – or component in – a sort of “Open211” or “Yelp for social services” system.

For instance, the Urban Strategies Council in Oakland is exploring creating a “Resource Directory Platform” (<http://is.gd/n7qt8C>) and are now using the Oakland LocalWiki to maintain their resource directory. With LocalWiki.net we will provide a unified, structured platform for exactly these sorts of community resource directory projects.

9. What part of the project have you already built?

The LocalWiki software, which we have been developing as part of our 2010 News Challenge grant, provides many of the core parts of the LocalWiki.net platform, including collaborative editing of pages, maps, and structured data, versioning of all content and displaying changes, a read/write API, usage metrics, and an easy to use interface that supports any language. We will reuse and extend all of these components in building LocalWiki.net.

With the LocalWiki project, we have built a community and movement spanning coll. LocalWiki.net will directly leverage – and greatly expand upon – this existing community.

10. What do you need to make this happen?

In order to have adequate resources to achieve the project's goals, as well as ensure core-project sustainability independent of foundation funding, we estimate a required budget of \$478,000 over a two-year timespan.

11. How would you sustain the project after the funding expires?

In Davis, the home of Davis Wiki, we were able to fundraise over \$30k from individual donors without any investment in fundraising. This tells us that local projects can fundraise. But we have also seen that it takes several years for projects to get to the level of Davis Wiki. So in a completely distributed project, as LocalWiki has been run so far, it would take several years to get to the point where an organization could be sustained.

LocalWiki.net addresses this core sustainability need. With a centralized approach there is a more direct link between contributors and the project, so community-based fundraising becomes much more straightforward.

Our goal with LocalWiki.net is to be able to cover the majority of core operational expenses directly through individual contributions by the end of the grant period. Extrapolating from the fundraising example in Davis, we would need only 5 times the level of interest that exists in Davis, distributed throughout the world, to achieve this goal.

Aside from traditional fundraising, there are a number of other revenue-generating models we wish to explore, such as fee-for-service, traditional paid membership dues, and paid, verified quality systems. For instance, there is considerable evidence that small, required donations or fees can increase quality in the presence of high volumes of otherwise unverifiable user-generated content. Two major examples of this are CouchSurfing.org's verified membership donation system, which nets CouchSurfing approximately \$800,000 / year and increases the quality of their site; and craigslist.org's fee system for job and rental postings in high-volume areas.

We will aggressively pursue additional grant and foundation funding, particularly from community and place-based foundations. The LocalWiki project already has tremendous capacity for fundraising, and we have a number of near-term potential funding opportunities. Funding for the LocalWiki.net project will give us the confidence and capacity to begin taking on these opportunities.

12. What are the expected outcomes?

- We expect **very rapid growth in the number of participating communities, individual contributors, and amount of content** soon after we launch LocalWiki.net. Thousands of people for whom starting an independent LocalWiki project was too big of a hurdle will be able to jump in and start to collaborate with their neighbors. And all of their initial excitement can be put toward contributing content and spreading the word instead of technical and administrative overhead.
- **The creation of a free, universally accessible platform and database of local community knowledge** which will be harnessed and adapted by countless organizations and applications. The dream of a massively-participatory, open database of local, geographically-relevant knowledge will finally be realized.

- We will **vastly improve the ability of citizens to share, collaborate and learn about their local communities**. Davis, California is among the most informed and engaged communities in the world, and a large part of that is due to the ability of residents to collaborate, share and learn via the DavisWiki. The LocalWiki.net project will allow us to effectively scale this approach to thousands of communities throughout the world.
- **Innovative technologies** created through the development of the LocalWiki.net project. With our work so far on LocalWiki we've already developed the world's first open-source, 100% rich text collaborative editing environment; the first fully-functional open-source visual "what's changed" algorithm for HTML; the first "what's changed" algorithm for geographic data; an innovative versioning system for structured databases; a sophisticated, generic framework for building geographic APIs; and much, much more. With LocalWiki.net we will tackle exciting new challenges and deliver readily-adaptable open-source solutions whose benefit extends beyond the LocalWiki.net project, particularly related to geospatial data, APIs, and collaborative editing environments.

13. What are the assumptions that will be tested and what indicators will be tracked?

- **A lightweight, less "project"-focused environment will lead to increased contribution, especially in new communities**. Right now, if someone wants to start a new LocalWiki project in their community, not only must they overcome the technical hurdles associated with setting up a server for the software, they must also engage in the difficult process of creating and building out an entirely new *project* from the ground up.

Indeed, the approach we've seen work well for all successful LocalWiki projects has been to spend a large period of time building out a base of unique,

interesting content and slowly invite an increasing number of potential contributors to the project. Because each LocalWiki instance is its own autonomous, disconnected project, initial build-out is an essential step to ensure the project becomes a destination.

This need to “build out” a complete-feeling project creates a psychological block for many potential contributors, resulting in a high barrier to entry. With LocalWiki.net, we will provide an environment where lightweight, frictionless contributions can be made without feeling the burden of creating a new *project*. We believe that this will radically increase contributions, especially in new communities.

We will aggressively track the number of contributors, pages, visitors, and compare them to the metrics we are collecting in the current, autonomous LocalWiki projects.

- **LocalWiki.net will find widespread usage as platform and database for civic, geographic and local projects.** We assume that an open, universally-accessible database of local, geographically-based information will benefit the world in immeasurable ways. Just as OpenStreetMap and Wikipedia catered to the free-culture community for much of their early existence, we expect that LocalWiki.net will be used as a platform primarily by free-culture and civic-minded groups early on. In time, and after the project becomes increasingly comprehensive on a global scale, we expect the platform to be adopted by mainstream organizations.
- **Community-based fundraising will be more straightforward.** We believe that with the centralized approach LocalWiki.net provides there is a more direct link between contributors and the project, so fundraising becomes much more straightforward. Imagine if Wikipedia, instead of being a single project containing several million pages, existed as thousands of independent projects

with a shared goal and backing institution. It is difficult to imagine the backing institution being able to sustain itself from direct community contributions, as Wikipedia does now. We will test and refine this assumption by beginning community-based fundraising efforts relatively early on into the development of LocalWiki.net.

- **The centralized nature of LocalWiki.net will provide vastly improved search engine ranking.** DavisWiki.org's search engine ranking is extremely good, with a search for nearly any phrase relevant to life in Davis, CA returning a DavisWiki link as the top result. As such, the majority of visitors find the project via a search engine. With a distributed approach, each new LocalWiki project must work independently to build up search engine reputation, a grueling process that can take years upon years. As such, it is much more difficult for new LocalWiki projects to organically grow outside of direct, on-the-ground community outreach efforts.

With the more centralized approach that LocalWiki.net provides, search engine ranking is shared among all the pages in the unified project. Someone can begin creating pages about an entirely new local community and those pages will be immediately ranked higher by search engines. This is similar to how a page on Wikipedia or Yelp will likely be among the top search engine hits even if the page has been created very recently.

We will build tools to continually track search engine performance over time. Furthermore, as a platform-focused project, LocalWiki.net has many more channels for delivering information than the traditional web-based, search-engine heavy approaches.

With LocalWiki, we've built a variety of tools for tracking project growth and success, including an integrated real-time “dashboard” for each LocalWiki instance. We will

make building similar metric-tracking tools an integrated part of our development process for LocalWiki.net.

14. What are the key challenges and risks that could disrupt the project?

We believe that LocalWiki.net is *the* needed disruption to the LocalWiki project. We believe that a semi-centralized, lightweight platform for local knowledge is inherently more likely to lead to widespread, OpenStreetMap-level adoption. That's why we are taking on the task ourselves: to harness our movement's energy and to build LocalWiki.net in a way that moves the free culture movement forward.

- **Running global, scalable technical infrastructure** is one of the key technical challenges. Our approach to scaling the LocalWiki project thus far has been to scale at the institution level: develop easy-to-install software that 'scales' by being installed in lots of different places. Building global and largely centralized infrastructure which accommodates thousands of communities across the world is a different scaling challenge. However, we have years of experience developing Internet-scale infrastructure and are well prepared to tackle this challenge.
- **Becoming a bigger target for spam and abuse** is a potential challenge, and one that every large user-generated website faces. It's not one that would disrupt the project until it has grown to a considerable size, but we will be prepared to anticipate and stop this problem. We have already taken preemptive measures to prevent spam and abuse in the LocalWiki software, and we have considerable experience with building tools and community structure that help mitigate any abuse.
- **Competition from external entities** is always a risk. In addition to the head start we have with the LocalWiki project, we believe that our greater openness

and the credibility of our track record will win over civic minded people, free culture enthusiasts, developers, individual contributors and enable widespread partnerships. As a project that lives or dies based on extensive volunteer goodwill, our non-profit nature gives us a level of credibility and trustworthiness not possible with commercial endeavors. We believe that commercial projects are fundamentally unwilling and unable to deliver on the promise of an truly open, universally accessible database of local knowledge. Furthermore, almost all commercial approaches to similar problems center around easily-monetizable aspects of community life, such as restaurant and business information, and ignore the vast majority of community information needs.

- As a unified, global project, we will have to **work to maintain a well-performing, global volunteer community**. On Wikipedia, most people only truly care about the articles that they edit – they don't strongly care about the Wikipedia project as a thing in of itself. Yet Wikipedia has successfully created a large core group of individuals who care deeply about the Wikipedia project in of itself. We will face a similar challenge to create a volunteer network around the LocalWiki.net project that extends beyond interest in particular local communities. This network has already begun to build, with an increasing number of individuals and organizations interested in the LocalWiki project at the “meta” level.