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Rural Broadband Brings National Political Enterprise to the Middle of Montana

Twenty-five miles outside of Phillipsburg, Montana, sits the 150-acre Great Divide Ranch. From the road, the ranch looks like a “dude” ranch one would expect to find in this part of the Rocky Mountains. But the Great Divide Ranch offers something more than horse riding lessons and an opportunity to brand your own cow.

Behind the walls of the main house, computers controlling one of the largest databases in the United States hum steadily in an open room...people dart about with coffee and readouts...and phones ring. Several TV’s are going at once, adding to the wall of sound.

This is the main vortex of the information hurricane known as Project Vote Smart. The Project, or PVS as it is commonly referred to, is a team-run operation of about 100 young people from all around the country. They come to Western Montana from places like Seattle, Los Angeles, Boston, Syracuse and Miami – all to take part in keeping America’s voters informed and up-to-speed on local, state and national political candidates from all parties.

Many are unpaid interns, simply making the trip to be a part of PVS and live in the mountains; to pick up information tech and entrepreneurial skills; and to be able to go ride a horse after work.

Essentially, PVS tracks all information – from speeches, to lectures, public appearances, newspaper and magazine quotes, TV commentary, voting records, campaign finance data and issue positions – for every major political candidate in the country, and then makes all of that available to the public to help educate potential voters and party supporters before elections. PVS maintains a gargantuan database on around 40,000 political candidates, and has a membership of 45,000. It receives a continuous flow of inquiries from major

news organizations, political organizations and individual citizens. Its Web resource gets hits from around the world.

Everything is available by phone or on the Web. All a prospective voter has to do is type in a keyword or phrase into the database, or ask one of the interns to help. Then it becomes only a matter of listening, or reading, and then, of course, voting.

And although PVS deals with a number of candidates with a number of political affiliations, the organization remains, at its core, completely non-partisan.

The booming metropolis of Philipsburg itself sports a population of 900. Being “outside of Phillipsburg,” such as the Great Divide Ranch, is remote by any measure. So how does such a technologically advanced enterprise requiring major communications resources and Internet speeds function in a place like this?

The answer of course is that thanks to Montana’s rural telecom providers, rural Montana today is just as wired as most major metropolitan areas. Broadband Internet capabilities and other hi-tech communications tools are readily available to even the most rural towns and ranches. Montana’s rural telecom providers have pushed high-quality, high-speed broadband service to over 80 percent, and usually nearly 100% of their service territories. And where broadband wires can’t reach, broadband satellite can. In short, there’s practically nowhere in Montana that can’t get broadband Internet today.

So when PVS came along looking for a home, Blackfoot Telephone cooperative of Missoula immediately jumped on the chance to help out, sending high speed facilities all the way out to the ranch—for free.

For Blackfoot and other telecom providers in Montana, going the extra mile (literally in this case) is nothing new. For example, Montana’s rural telecom providers are working with health care providers in Billings and Kalispell to build regional networks that bring better health care to remote parts of our state. Rural patients requiring radiology exams used to wait for days for a radiologist to make rounds to local rural health care centers, return to base, read x-rays and return

results to the patients. Now, with telemedicine facilities being deployed by rural telecom providers throughout Montana, such procedures are reduced to hours.

For Project Vote Smart, it wasn't plowing through solid Rocky Mountain stone that was the biggest challenge in getting service to the Great Divide Ranch—although that certainly was a challenge as it is anywhere in our sparsely populated state. It was the capacity that was the big deal. Blackfoot had to get a very substantial amount of cable out there to provide PVS with the bandwidth they needed. As partners in Montana's economic development, Montana's rural telecom providers like Blackfoot make sure their customers have what they need, no matter what.

PVS is just one of many shining examples of businesses succeeding in Montana because of a combination of telecommunications infrastructure and a good business plan. PVS is not alone in having decided to locate in remote Montana so their people could have a great place to work *and* live.

And that's an unbeatable combination.

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