

Is WinstonNet Sustainable?

There are many concerns surrounding the sustainability of WinstonNet as a business model. There are also many open doors and avenues for WinstonNet to explore in how to fulfill its mission, create value for the community, and generate a sustainable operation.

To begin the process of exploring sustainability, I will first discuss the many advantages that WinstonNet has currently. Its largest and most obvious advantage is the number of powerful and well-reputed organizations in its community membership. Wake Forest University provides WinstonNet with a number of resources. The university has experience in servicing a community with wireless technology and computers as well as many bright minds that can lend advice to WinstonNet. There are other universities in the membership that lend this same sort of experiential learning and brain power, including Forsyth Tech and Winston Salem University.

WinstonNet also has a key partnership with the public school system. This means that its main avenue for reaching low-income children is already secured. In addition to the schools, members of SECCA are on the board of WinstonNet, securing an avenue to the arts community in Winston Salem.

Another very valuable resource within the WinstonNet value network is 1 Economy and its Beehive portal. This organization has considerable experience gaining funding and getting affordable computers to low-income families. With the experience of 1 Economy by its side, WinstonNet is well positioned to execute its mission of reaching low-income households.

Besides the community network, a second advantage to WinstonNet is the numerous models of city wireless initiatives from which WinstonNet can learn. From Austin, TX to the country of Chile, all these geographic locations have implemented wireless community initiatives and provide a starting ground for lessons on what works and what does not.

A third advantage is a host of options for capturing value in order to generate revenue to lend to sustainability. A number of these options were presented by the class and include providing training/consulting services for the organizations that want to use WinstonNet wireless to their advantage, revenue sharing with Azulstar, creating a portal that supports advertising abilities and more.

The final advantage WinstonNet has is its current director, Linda Goff. Linda is a paid, full-time employee of WinstonNet who has extensive knowledge about the community, technology and has the backing of board members who each represent the organizations in her community network. Linda's expertise along with a seeming willingness to think big and keep an open mind is an extremely valuable resource in the success of WinstonNet.

While WinstonNet has in its grasp a host of advantages that can lend to a sustainable business model there are several challenges as well. As stated earlier, WinstonNet has the support of several key organizations within the Forsyth community. However, as with all new initiatives, initial excitement about the project motivates its supporters but sustaining excitement and interest in the project will be Linda's responsibility over the life of WinstonNet. The organizations who are currently advising and supporting the project are large, bureaucratic institutions whose first priorities are their own complex business objectives. WinstonNet will need to move quickly and be able to show progress and success in order to keep its support network engaged. Linda and her staff will also have to be savvy at maintaining relationships with the key parties within the support organizations and building new relationships within other possible support organizations.

The second and possibly most significant challenge to sustainability is WinstonNet's ability to monetize its services and generate a revenue base. WinstonNet operations are currently supported by only one paid staff member, but to truly achieve its mission the organization will

need a dedicated, paid staff. Generating enough man power on a budget that is strictly funded by grants will be next to impossible as funding for non-profits is generally volatile. If WinstonNet can leverage the support of organizations in its community network, it may be able to raise enough initial funding to hire staff and begin services that can be monetized. Whether or not this is possible relies heavily on the level of interest and dedication of the community network and Linda's fundraising efforts.

Assuming WinstonNet can meet this challenge, the next major barrier to success will be an inability to effectively service low-income families. The cultural divide between the WinstonNet board of directors and those it is seeking to help is deep. Currently, the only organization within the board with a day to day understanding of low-income families is Forsyth public schools. Unfortunately, the public school system is probably the organization within this network most focused on its own challenges and bureaucracy.

WinstonNet has not conducted an intensive dive into understanding the individuals it seeks to serve. This is the first step necessary to serving this community, which currently has limited representation within WinstonNet's network. The second step will be effectively communicating the value of WinstonNet services to potential customers. To deliver this message WinstonNet will have to permeate racial and class boundaries. WinstonNet has yet to prove that it's serious about gaining the kind of understanding necessary to do so.

Before WinstonNet begins to consider any of the above challenges, the organization will need to define a clear and concise focus. The door is wide open for how to leverage a community wireless network, but in order for WinstonNet to be sustainable it will need a clearly defined and feasible starting point. A clear focus will help the organization stay within the scope of feasibility and measure success so that it can make the case to its funders and supporters as it begins to broaden and grow its initiative.

In conclusion, while there are a number of challenges to the sustainability of WinstonNet, there are also locations around the United States successfully creating wireless communities. Given WinstonNet's base of powerful relationships and expertise capable of addressing these challenges and concerns, a sustainable business, while not yet established, is certainly not infeasible.