

Broadband Expansion: Rural Wisconsin Needs the Real Deal

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The internet, like the waterways, railways, and highways before it, has become the road to participation in the 21st century economy. Wisconsin ranks last in the Midwest in both rural and urban broadband, and neither the Governor's proposed budget funding or a bill authored by Sen. Marklein provide rural areas with the investment necessary to make us competitive.

NORTHWESTERN WISCONSIN - "All we seek is help to get the basic broadband services that you all take for granted," Justin Fortney from Clifton Township in Pierce County wrote to me. "It has been frustrating for us families to watch the digital revolution pass us by...We often...pack the family into the car and drive to a relative's house or commercial business to use their Internet."

According to the federal government's most recent information, Wisconsin ranks last in the Midwest in both rural and urban broadband access with only 44% of rural folks accessing download speeds of 25 Mbps.

Both federal and state governments responded with grant programs to expand broadband but there are problems with assuring that residents actually receive the promised services.

With much fanfare, Governor Walker recently announced his plan to add money for broadband to schools and rural areas. Later, Senator Marklein released a different bill. The Senator's bill was voted out of his rural affairs committee and is headed for final passage soon.

Sen. Marklein's bill is false advertising. The bill is neither "rural" nor "broadband." As now written, nearly every Wisconsin county would be eligible for expansion grants. "Broadband" for awardees is defined at the "turtle-slow" speed of 5 Mbps download and .6 Mbps upload. In addition, such a paltry amount of money is used for grants that would not cover my small rural county with broadband even if we used all the statewide funds.

More problems exist with the federal grant programs.

Mr. Fortney described the problem in his email. He refers to one federal program known as "CAF-II."

"Our area is CAF-II Subsidized Area, but still no Internet. These limited funds are being used by the...company to further increase the speed of areas that already have broadband." Mr. Fortney described how both large companies near him said they have no plans to provide services to him. Yet both companies received large grants to expand broadband.

The two large companies mentioned by Mr. Fortney sent representatives to a community meeting I attended last year. Neither company would commit to expanding service in Pierce County. In the words of one company representative, "I don't want to promise you fiber where fiber is not going to come...It's not a great business investment to put in copper or fiber," and "We're not going to go trenching through a bluff...[we are looking for] where can we grab the low hanging fruit."

What can Wisconsin do if these large companies do not intend to use federal dollars to bring the 21st Century to rural Wisconsin?

First, we should agree on WHAT IS broadband. The federal definition – 25 Mbps download speed and 3 Mbps upload is a good place to start. Unfortunately, Senate Bill 49 (the bill speeding for hasty passage) will award grants to those providing much less.

Second, money for “Rural” broadband should go to rural areas. Senate Bill 49 – and the current state grant program – makes nearly the entire state eligible for awards. The Public Service Commission has broad latitude to send the money to just about any county in the state. This should change.

Third, Wisconsin must invest enough money to actually make a difference in the problem. To date, the state awarded 42 grants totaling approximately \$3.9 million. This money is not enough to provide broadband for just my small home county. In comparison, Minnesota appropriated \$65.5 million and Governor Dayton is proposing spending another \$100 million.

Finally, Wisconsin should independently verify that companies keep their promises to the state (in their grant applications) and to consumers. I frequently hear of companies promising one speed and delivering another, of broadband maps that show an area as served and it is not, and of companies using poor service in an area to apply for a grant and then not delivering services to the neighbors.

Broadband is the 21st Century equivalent of electricity. Someday most of us may plan a visit to a rural area or are going to need to contact someone in a rural area. All of us are going to eat something grown in a rural area and these days you need broadband for farming. We need to make sure the promised “Rural Broadband” bill is the Real Deal for rural Wisconsin.

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