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Sen. Jeff Smith writes about Governor Tony Evers' efforts to expand broadband access with historic investments and innovative policies in his biennial budget.

MADISON - What year is this? You might quickly answer that it's 2021 and you'd be right. But Governor Tony Evers also declared this as the Year of Broadband Access in Wisconsin. This declaration is exciting and important in more ways than one.

For starters, Governor Evers' budget includes a historic $200 million investment to improve Wisconsin's broadband infrastructure – this is five times the amount invested in the 2013, 2015, and 2017 budgets combined. The Governor is also directing a significant portion of infrastructure funding from the federal American Rescue Plan toward expanding broadband access.

The Year of Broadband Access highlights the opportunity to bring legislators and constituents together around one issue that will make a big difference. I've heard from colleagues on both sides of the aisle that this must get done. I've heard from my Republican colleagues that they like the ideas I proposed last session. Now, this is something to build on. We may find that we can actually get things done if we work together on this important project.

Governor Evers' recent budget listening session on bolstering Wisconsin's infrastructure

reminded so many of us why we must focus our efforts on expanding broadband. The Federal Communications Commission reports that there are more than 430,000 people in rural Wisconsin who lack access to high-speed internet; this is about 25% of our rural population. I'd even say it's much higher than that if they're relying on what Internet Service Providers (ISP) are reporting. One of the biggest problems is the questionable mapping based on census blocks. If an ISP reports that one house or business in a census block has access, then the entire census block is counted as having access. This is why I've been pushing for honest mapping and greater accountability.



We also need the Legislature to remove roadblocks for municipalities to expand broadband. Current law prohibits municipalities from offering internet access without having an ISP providing it. This is problematic because private services need to show a profit and they're not interested in rural areas with low population density. The Governor borrowed an idea from my Better Broadband legislative package by removing this restriction, so municipalities who aren't currently served could make the investment to provide broadband to their residents. As I've suggested over and over, municipal governments don't want to get in the business of managing this service, but they could own the fiber that an ISP leases to become that provider.

Wisconsin currently has a broadband expansion grant program, which provides funding for projects in underserved and unserved areas. It's woefully underfunded though, and provides just enough to expand access at a snail's pace. In the last budget cycle the Legislature invested $54 million for this program. In his budget, Governor Evers proposes directing nearly $150 million into the grant program.



Internet affordability is a challenge that is often overlooked. For too many families, the cost is just not within their budget after rent, food and other basic necessities. Governor Evers' budget

includes $40 million to create an Internet Assistance Program just for that reason. This program would reduce costs and make internet services affordable for tens of thousands of low-income families throughout Wisconsin. The budget also creates a Broadband Line Extension grant program, which will reduce the cost of expensive line extensions from residences to existing broadband infrastructure.

It's become more obvious over the last year that internet access isn't just a luxury – it's a necessity. Broadband expansion efforts go beyond our kids logging on for class, shopping online and streaming movies. Now we use the internet to access health care, pay bills and do our jobs. High-speed internet is a must if we want the next generation to have the option of living in the splendor of rural Wisconsin.

I'm just as excited at the possibility of legislators coming together to work on this critical issue, which will improve our way of life and strengthen our economy. Imagine where this might lead us. We may discover the political process of working together that citizens have been asking for.