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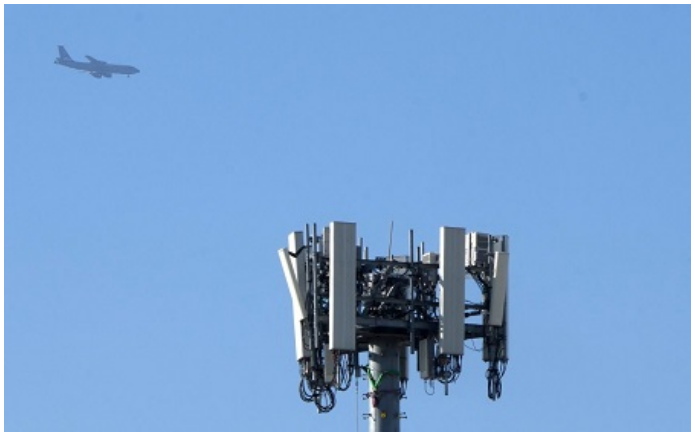
Sen. Jeff Smith writes about his Rural Development Plan, a comprehensive package of legislation designed to create opportunities for our rural communities.

EAU CLAIRE, WI - Thirty-six years ago, my wife and I built our home from the ground up in Brunswick, a rural part of Eau Claire County. We both grew up in the area and didn't think twice about leaving. Before we started laying the foundation of our home, we started with a blueprint showing how to achieve our dream home. Months went by and our vision became reality.

The hard work that went into our home was well worth it. Our home became my office where I grew my business. It's where my wife and I rested after we put in a hard day's work. It's where we raised our two daughters and built our future together.

As senator, I've been working on another type of blueprint—and it's one for Wisconsin's future. For the last four years serving the 31st Senate District, I've listened and learned about ways to make rural Wisconsin thrive.

I'm proud today to unveil my Rural Development Plan. It's a comprehensive package of legislation designed to create opportunities for our rural communities. Through statewide broadband expansion, workforce development initiatives and fair funding for our K-12 schools, we can make rural Wisconsin a place where families and businesses want to call home.



Governor Evers has already shown us what's possible for Wisconsin. During his first term, the governor championed broadband expansion, creating a Broadband Access Task Force and making the largest broadband investment in state history during the 'Year of Broadband Access.' The governor restored two-thirds funding for our local schools and targeted support to address regional workforce challenges.

Despite the pandemic, Wisconsin has a record-high surplus, all-time low unemployment rate and our state's general fund has the largest positive balance in state history. Governor Evers continues to build a strong economy that works for all Wisconsinites and my Rural Development Plan builds off the governor's success.

We have the money and now's the time to make the investments. In May 2021, the Public Service Commission of Wisconsin estimated the full cost of broadband expansion to be between $700 Million and $1.4 Billion. Knowing this and the strong point our economy's at now, we can make statewide broadband expansion happen.

Imagine how this could boost our communities, ensuring all homes and businesses in rural Wisconsin are connected to high-speed internet. It will connect our rural producers to urban consumers, enhance educational opportunities for students and help elderly residents stay in their homes.

My Rural Development Plan also includes five other bills to exponentially expand broadband and ensure every penny is spent wisely. These bills improve internet affordability, strengthen consumer protections and help farms get connected first.

The top priority I hear from constituents is broadband, but workforce development is a close second. My Rural Development Plan creates the Freedom to Learn program which offers free tuition for students enrolled at a technical college or at one of the two-year UW campuses. Even though we have one of the lowest unemployment rates in the nation, there's still more we can do.

Student debt shouldn't affect our ability to get skilled workers into the workplace—this proposal is a commonsense way to help Wisconsinites gain new skills and be more successful.

It's well known that our public schools are the heart of any community, especially in rural areas. Preserving rural America means preserving public education. For years, we've known the school funding formula is flawed. We've kicked the can down the road for too long. We have the money and we owe it to our kids to finally fix the problem. That's why the Rural Development Plan uses Governor Tony Evers' Fair Funding for Our Future plan to do the right thing for rural schools.

I put a lot of work into building my family's home years ago and I've never regretted it. In western Wisconsin, we have something special: a welcoming community, strong work ethic and a beautiful landscape. Rural Wisconsin has much to offer. If we want to preserve our way of life while attracting and retaining future generations, we must make the investments today.

The blueprint is done—now it's time to build.