

Gov. Evers Proposes Expanding Access and Affordability of High-Speed Internet

Written by GOV Press Wisconsin
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<http://newiproggressive.com/images/stories/S5/work-from-home-s5.jpg>



Governor proposes record-setting \$750 million investment to close the digital divide; JFC removes key provisions to promote equity, affordability, and reliability.

MADISON — Gov. Tony Evers this week will travel across the state to highlight his 2023-25 biennial budget proposal to provide a historic investment of \$750 million for the Broadband Expansion Grant Program to expand access to high-speed internet across the state. This historic proposal builds upon the governor's previous record-setting investments in expanding broadband across the state and is more than four times larger than the total funding provided to the grant program over Gov. Evers' past two budgets.

"Over the last four years, we've made record-setting investments in expanding access to high-speed internet across the state, and with our investments, more than 390,000 homes and businesses in every corner of Wisconsin will have new or improved internet access," said Gov. Evers. "But there is still more work to do if we want to make sure our infrastructure is prepared to support a workforce and an economy of the 21st Century."



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“We have a historic surplus, and with it, a historic opportunity to invest in needs that have long been neglected,” continued Gov. Evers. “So, while I am disappointed JFC removed several key provisions to improve the reliability and affordability of internet for families, I hope the Legislature will join me in taking this historic opportunity to close the digital divide, invest in our families and communities, and keep up our economic momentum.”

Over the past four years, Gov. Evers has gotten to work to expand access and affordability of high-speed internet for Wisconsinites across the state. In 2020, he created the [Governor's Task Force on Broadband Access](#), and in 2021, he declared it the [Year of Broadband Access](#).

Further, since 2019, Gov. Evers has allocated more than \$340 million in state and federal funds to expand high-speed internet. With the help of these investments, more than 390,000 homes and businesses will have new or improved access to reliable, high-speed internet.

The [Wisconsin Broadband Office](#) (WBO) at the Public Service Commission of Wisconsin (PSC) estimates that, in 2022, there were 650,000 Wisconsinites without access to the infrastructure needed to bring 25 megabits per second (Mbps) download and 3 Mbps upload broadband into their home or business. The WBO also estimates that there are also 650,000 Wisconsinites who cannot afford broadband.

The governor's budget provides \$750 million for the [Broadband Expansion Grant Program](#), which works to provide or improve broadband communications services in underserved areas across the state, with a requirement that the PSC spends at least \$75 million annually on grants. From fiscal year 2019 through fiscal year 2022, Broadband Expansion Grants have provided more than \$184 million to more than 235 projects to get homes and businesses connected across the state.



The governor's budget proposal also included several provisions to update the Broadband Expansion Grant Program to modernize the program criteria and create new consumer protections for broadband customers. Unfortunately, these provisions were removed by the Joint Committee on Finance (JFC) in a single motion earlier this month, along with [540 other provisions](#).

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These removed provisions included a proposal to strengthen the Broadband Expansion Grant Program to ensure that all Wisconsinites have access to reliable and affordable broadband service by:

- Increasing the speed threshold for broadband service for an area to be considered “served” to 100 Mbps download and 20 Mbps upload and allowing the PSC to periodically update this speed threshold based on technology and market conditions;
- Requiring an area to have access to broadband service that is “available, reliable, and affordable” for the area to be considered “served;”
- Requiring the PSC to consider the affordability of broadband service in the proposed project area when evaluating grant applications; and
- Establishing a procedure for internet service providers to challenge a grant award.

JFC also removed the governor’s proposal to create a Broadband Line Extension Grant Program, funded at \$1.75 million in fiscal year 2023-24 and \$3.5 million in fiscal year 2024-25, to provide grants and financial assistance to eligible households to subsidize the cost of a line extension from existing broadband infrastructure to a residence that is not served by a broadband provider. In addition, they removed a provision to eliminate several statutory restrictions for certain municipalities defined as broadband “unserved” to enable them to directly invest in broadband infrastructure and provide service to residents and allow these communities to apply directly for broadband expansion grant funding from the PSC.

The governor’s budget also would’ve promoted equity and reliability by modifying current law to create a Digital Equity program supported by funding from the state Universal Service Fund and to protect broadband customers by requiring broadband service providers to meet certain service requirements, including prohibiting a broadband service provider from denying service to residential customers based on race or income and requiring providers to award credits to customers’ internet bills based on service outages.