http://newiprogressive.com/images/stories/S5/internet-rural-s5.jpg 

Sen. Kathleen Vinehout attended a meeting with business people, elected officials, telecommunication companies, and the State Broadband Director to discuss what can be done to solve the problems with rural broadband connectivity.

LA CROSSE, WI - “I don’t want to promise you fiber where fiber is not going to come,” Kent Disch, AT&T Wisconsin External Affairs Director, told Ellsworth community leaders.

Pierce County business leaders and elected officials gathered with telecommunication company representatives and local cooperatives to push for resolution to Internet problems.

Business leaders asked companies why they would not or could not bring services to businesses that were more than willing to pay. A concrete company owner noted his company is growing but lack of good broadband “is a bottleneck.” Broadband is needed to prosper.

One after another, the business leaders, county board members, and a former mayor shared community problems. People could not join mandatory webinars or attend virtual conference meetings. Locals frequently experienced dropped Internet connections. The Internet would not work at certain times of the day.

Families could not obtain services they needed for the business of life. Teens drove across the river to Minnesota to download files. Elderly women had inadequate phone service. Others completely lost phone service with no plans by the company to replace old copper lines. Some couldn’t get Internet at all.

“How motivated is AT&T to work here?” a local business owner asked. Clearly frustrated, she said, “I am still waiting for voicemail [for my business phone]. And it’s been ten years!”

“It’s not a great business investment to put in copper or fiber,” the AT&T representative told the group.

Here was part of the problem. Local people live in an area lacking large concentrations of people. The network of fiber is more valuable to a company as more people are connected. Without some type of incentive, the companies appeared uninterested or unable to connect rural residents.

Earlier this year three companies, AT&T, Frontier, and CenturyLink received more than $570 million in federal money to build rural broadband. As reported in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, Wisconsin is second only to California in the dollars given to the states through the Connect America Fund II program. Wisconsin also made a very modest investment of a few million dollars in grants to expand broadband.

With this incentive, one would think things were great and build-out would be coming soon. But, not so fast - maybe six or seven years - no commitments.

“We’re not going to go trenching through a bluff,” said the AT&T representative. “We are figuring out what facilities we have. We are a large wireless company…how do we leverage [our assets] to get the best bang for the buck…where can we grab the low hanging fruit…where do we have cell towers with capacity…there is a lot of engineering that goes into this.”

Throughout the discussion, residents learned the place they chose to live was largely responsible for the problems they experienced. Soaring bluffs, rocky outcrops, rolling hills – our beautiful state – was responsible for our lack of broadband.

People at the meeting reviewed maps of connectivity. However, the maps did not accurately show the void in service coverage.

“We know the map is incorrect,” said Angie Dickison, State Broadband Director as she handed

me a brightly colored map of our Senate District. “Why?” I asked. She replied, “Data comes from the providers. Reporting is done on census block. If just one person receives service the entire census block is covered.”

When I asked specific questions about resolving people’s problems I learned most problems could be solved.

Does the Internet drop you? Your service is “oversubscribed” meaning there are too many people on the line. Is it hard to get on at certain times of the day? There are too many people and not enough equipment. Having problems with lag-time on the computer? A common problem with satellite service as the signal travels to outer space and back again.

Could the state get an accurate internet connectivity map? Yes. But the law requiring companies to provide detailed data was changed with the telecommunication “modernization.”

Wisconsin lost the levers of power to require certain actions by companies (such as providing basic phone service to everyone) by deregulation. Now, it seems, we are relying on the goodwill of the company and the lure of public dollars to bring broadband to rural areas.

But will the company deliver? There are no promises.