

Rep. Petryk: Positive reforms will bring broadband opportunities to rural Wisconsin

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Last summer and fall I had the privilege to serve as Vice Chair of the Legislative Council Study Committee on Rural Broadband, a bi-partisan committee made up of four legislators and nine members of the public. Representing our 93rd Assembly District, I have been diligently working toward the goal of increasing access to broadband to help improve rural business, education, telemedicine, and quality of life.

Our committee worked for over four months to write Senate Bill 49, which was introduced by the committee's Chair, Senator Marklien. The legislation makes changes to current law relating to the state Broadband Expansion Grant program. The bill clarifies how priority criteria should be applied in determining whether to award a grant, reserves \$1.5 million annually for continued funded for the grant program, and creates a requirement that certain impacts of proposed broadband projects be considered before awarding a grant.

This bill directly helps rural areas as it clearly defines that grant priority be given to areas that do not have Internet service and underserved areas that have service with speeds of 5 Mbps download / 600 Kbps upload. This definition was specifically put into place as although areas may have some internet service, if it's 20% or less of what the FCC defines as broadband, they will still be considered as underserved and looked at as high priority in eligibility for a grant.

I want to thank Senator Vinehout for her support voting in favor of the bill, which passed unanimously in the Senate Committee on Revenue, Financial Institutions and Rural Issues. The bill will now move to both houses for final passage.

These grants are only part of the investment that goes into broadband expansion projects. Companies investing in these project will still need to provide fast enough speeds to entice customers to purchase their services and that will be indicated on their application, giving the state's Public Service Commission (PSC) who administers the grant program final determination for approval.

The goal of this legislation, per discussion of the study committee, was to give the PSC as much flexibility as possible to respond quickly since technology changes frequently. With that in mind, we also wanted to provide some guidance on the grant application, providing legislative intent so these grants will be awarded specifically to rural communities by filling the need for broadband expansion from the bottom up.