

# Senate amends broadband bill to add privacy protections

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The Senate unanimously signed off on legislation that would alter the criteria for broadband expansion grants and make \$18.5 million more available after amending it to ban providers from collecting information on their customers' use without their permission.

The amendment comes a day after President Trump signed legislation to repeal Federal Communications Commission rules that would have required broadband companies to get permission from their customers before using data such as their browsing history, financial and other sensitive information to create targeted ads.

The amendment to the state bill, proposed by Minority Leader Jennifer Shilling, D-La Crosse, would ban providers from refusing to provide services to those who does not approve of their data being collected.

Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald, R-Juneau, originally objected to the amendment, suggesting it was outside the scope of the legislation and therefore was improperly before the body. But after the Senate broke to hear the State of the Tribes address, Fitzgerald withdrew his objection and then vote for the amendment, which passed unanimously.

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Republicans shot down a series of other changes as Dems complained the bill wouldn't go far enough to help underserved rural areas and fell well short of what other states are doing.

State Sen. Kathleen Vinehout, D-Alma, proposed several amendments she said would ensure the bill would achieve the goal of extending broadband service to areas that need it. As written, she said, many of her constituents would continue to

watch the digital revolution from afar as providers pass over their rural areas for adequate broadband service.

“This bill gives the illusion we’re going to bridge the gap of the digital divide,” Vinehout said.

But GOP Sen. Howard Marklein, one of the bill’s co-sponsors, said the bill is a huge opportunity to expand broadband access and time was of the essence. He said the Public Service Commission is ready to open a new application process as soon as the bill is signed into law. But the new funding must be spent by June 30, the end of the current fiscal year.

“We need to do it today,” said Marklein, R-Spring Green.

The grants, which are used to increase broadband access and capacity, now place a priority on projects that include matching funds, public-private partnerships, and areas with no service providers, among other things.

The criteria that the grants promote economic development would stress job growth or retention, expansion of the property tax base or improvement of the overall economic activity in an area.

Also, the criteria on pertaining to areas with no broadband service providers would be deleted. Instead, priority would be given to areas not served by a provider offering Internet service that meet two criteria, including a new standard for upload and download speeds.

The bill also would transfer \$6 million from the universal service fund and \$5 million in fed money in DOA’s federal e-rate appropriation to the grant program. It also would repeal current limits of no more than \$1.5 million in grants being issued in a year.

In addition, another \$7.5 million would be made available through the TEACH program, which subsidizes the cost of installing data lines and video links for schools, tech college districts, private and tribal colleges, and public library boards, among others. The additional money would be transferred to the grants from money received through the federal e-rate program.