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Gov. Evers: Signs executive order creating governor's task force on broadband access

Posted on Tuesday, Jul 14, 2020

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MADISON – Gov. Tony Evers today signed Executive Order #80 creating the Governor's Task Force on Broadband Access. The task force will advise the governor and Wisconsin State Legislature on broadband actions and policy, including strategies for successfully expanding high speed internet access to every residence, business, and institution in the state; initiatives for digital inclusion; and pathways to unlocking and optimizing the benefits of statewide, affordable access to broadband for all communities in Wisconsin.

"The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored that access to high-speed broadband is a necessity, not a luxury, and folks across our state have had to adapt—from kids and educators shifting to virtual classrooms, workers having to work from home, and even folks using telemedicine to visit with their doctor," said Gov. Evers. "I'm proud the People's Budget made the largest investment in our broadband infrastructure in Wisconsin history, but we know we have more work to do and we have to connect the dots on how lack of reliable, affordable broadband affects folks across our state. This task force will bring together experts from across the state to research and recommend solutions that state leaders can adopt to connect every person in Wisconsin."

Broadband access is an essential catalyst to drive community, public safety, learning, health, and economic goals across the state of Wisconsin and, as outlined in a recent report by the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation, will be critical to the state's economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, there are dire consequences that result from a lack of connectivity. According to the Federal Communications Commission 2020 Broadband Deployment Report, 7.1% of Wisconsin residents lack access to at least one broadband service with a speed of

25/3 Mbps or better, compared to the national average of 5.6%. This percentage deepens in rural areas of our state where 26.7% of Wisconsin residents lack access to at least one broadband service.

In March, the Public Service Commission of Wisconsin (PSC) awarded $24 million through the Broadband Expansion Grant Program, which was part of a $48 million investment in broadband included in Gov. Evers' first biennial budget. That one round of funding invested more money in broadband than in the previous seven rounds of grants combined, according to PSC Chairperson Becky Valcq. In addition to the Broadband Expansion Grant Program, Wisconsin needs creative solutions to bridge the digital divide. The task force will foster the creativity, collaborative efforts, and innovation necessary to get Wisconsin residents connected.

"In many cases, the hardest part of getting access to all is finding ways to connect that last half-mile—sometimes literally down country roads and driveways to homes and businesses," said Chairperson Valcq.

The task force will be chaired by Brittany Beyer, Executive Director for Grow North Regional Economic Development Corporation, and consists of members who represent a balance of interests, perspectives, and areas of expertise. It will bring together a diverse group of stakeholders to research and develop recommendations for actions so that all Wisconsinites can have access to this essential and critical service needed for daily life.

The task force members are:

- Brittany Beyer, Executive Director, Grow North Regional Economic Development Corporation
- Marta Bechtol, Executive Director, Educational Communications Board
- Tom Boron, IT Director, Washburn County
- Chad Young, CEO/General Manager, Norvado
- Jean Pauk, Government Affairs Manager, TDS Telecommunications
- Celeste Flynn, Director of Government Affairs, Charter Communications
- Kurt Kiefer, Assistant State Superintendent, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction
- Theron Rutyna, IT Director, Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa
- Brett Schuppner, General Manager, Reedsburg Utility Commission
- Jose Martinez, Vice President, UMOS
- Chris Meyer, Director of Virtual Care and Telehealth, Marshfield Clinic Health System

- Scott VanderSanden, President – AT&T Plains States, AT&T
- Chris Her-Xiong, Executive Director/Principal, Hmong American Peace Academy
- Emily Dittmar, Legislative Director, Wisconsin Educational Media and Technology Association
- Andrew Faust, Senior GIS Analyst, North Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission
- Robert Earl Baker III, Founder, RenderTech
- Lori Collins, President/CEO, SonicNet Inc.
- Gail Huycke, Community Development Specialist, UW-Extension Center for Community and Economic Development
- Shannon Clark, CEO & General Manager, Richland Electric Cooperative
- Salvador L. Carranza, Founder, Latino Education Council of Dane County
- State Representative Beth Meyers (D-Bayfield)
- State Representative Jeffrey Mursau (R-Crivitz)
- State Senator Howard Marklein (R-Spring Green)
- State Senator Patty Schachtner (D-Somerset)

The task force will prepare an annual report that will include the current state of broadband in Wisconsin, as well as recommendations for policies and initiatives to overcome challenges to statewide access, affordability and adoption. Staffing support for the task force will be provided by the PSC's State Broadband Office. The task force's first meeting will be later this summer.