

Gov. Evers, WEDC: Announce pilot program to Test SpaceX internet service in Eau Claire County

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EAU CLAIRE — Gov. Tony Evers, together with the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC), today announced the WEDC is assisting Eau Claire County in launching a pilot program to test SpaceX's Starlink, a constellation of low Earth orbit satellites that can provide high-speed internet in rural areas where broadband is limited or not available. The announcement comes as Gov. Evers continues to underscore the importance of expanding access to reliable, high-speed internet as part of declaring 2021 the Year of Broadband Access.

The pilot project, which will provide high-speed internet to 50 rural homes and businesses, is being supported by a \$27,500 Capacity Building Grant from WEDC, as well as funding from a group of healthcare providers including Marshfield Clinic, Mayo Clinic and Hospital Sisters Health System. Chippewa Valley Technical College and PESI Online Learning also contributed and are partners on the pilot project.

"We know that having access to reliable, affordable internet is no longer a luxury, it's a necessity," Gov. Evers said. "Making sure that every Wisconsinite has access to this vital service is going to require creativity and innovation, and that's the kind of approach WEDC's investment in Starlink demonstrates."

Gov. Evers' 2021-23 biennial budget as introduced proposed the largest state investment in broadband access in state history—nearly \$200 million over the biennium—which includes nearly \$150 million toward expanding broadband infrastructure in underserved areas and \$40 million toward helping low-income Wisconsinites afford internet services. Broadband expansion has been identified as a top economic development priority in WEDC's Wisconsin Tomorrow report and Gov. Evers' Blue Ribbon Commission on Rural Prosperity's report.

“The pandemic has demonstrated that reliable, high-speed internet access is essential today for work, for school and to access healthcare,” said Missy Hughes, WEDC secretary and CEO. “Getting broadband out to everyone in this state isn’t a moon shot, but it will require a variety of creative, innovative approaches because there’s no one one-size-fits-all solution.”

“Connecting everyone in the state to high-speed and reliable broadband service requires strategic investments, public-private partnerships, and pilots like this, which encourage innovative ideas resulting in new internet connections,” said Chairperson of the Public Service Commission of Wisconsin (PSC), Rebecca Cameron Valcq. “This pilot program will have a real impact on students attending school virtually, those working from home, and patients scheduling telehealth visits with their doctors.” PSC Broadband Office staff assisted with the development of the pilot program through data analytics and mapping support.

During the one-year pilot program, Eau Claire County residents will test how well the service performs for work, for accessing healthcare and for attending online classes. What makes the Starlink system different than traditional satellite internet is that it uses satellites in a low orbit. This can reduce the service’s latency – the delay between sending and receiving data, or the lag between talking and hearing someone respond.

By partnering with schools and healthcare systems, the county will be able to get a good idea of how the service works for different uses, said Dave Hayden, information systems director for Eau Claire County.

“We’re testing this technology in an area that’s unserved and underserved and testing this in a way that it gives all of these entities information on how it works for their applications,” Hayden said. “The real goal of this is to prove the technology.”

That’s the hope of area healthcare providers who see access to broadband service as key to offering better access to healthcare.

“Telehealth has the potential to remove some of the barriers and disparities of healthcare by eliminating the barrier of travel,” said Chris Meyer, Marshfield Clinic Health System’s director of virtual care and telehealth. Meyer also sits on Gov. Tony Evers’ Task Force on Broadband Access.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Marshfield Clinic Health System had about 15,000 telehealth visits per year. Six months into the pandemic, the system had seen about 165,000 telehealth visits.

Luke Annandale is hoping that taking part in the Starlink pilot project will allow him to study nursing at Chippewa Valley Technical College this fall. Annandale, who lives between Augusta and Fairchild, works nights at a building materials supplier. It would be exhausting to drive nearly an hour into Eau Claire to attend classes in person after working all night, he said.

That's why he wants to start his schooling online. He and his partner currently have a traditional satellite internet provider but there is a problem.

"There is a time period of the day where it just cuts out," said Annandale, mentioning how terrifying that would be on a timed exam. "It's always when I need it to work."

SpaceX's Starlink is now delivering initial beta service both domestically and internationally and will continue expansion to near-global coverage in 2021. For this pilot, the county with assistance from WEDC and others is paying the \$499 equipment fee and \$99 a month service fee for each participating household for one year.

Other community-minded organizations also donated to the project including Eau Claire Energy Cooperative, Eau Claire Economic Development Corporation and Royal Credit Union.

The Starlink initiative is the most recent pilot program supported by WEDC to help expand broadband service throughout the state. Earlier this year, Gov. Evers, WEDC, and the PSC announced a \$100,000 pilot program with the Northland Pines School District to test the use of tethered drones to deliver wi-fi service for students.