

# Gov. Evers, WEDC, PSC: Announce \$100,000 grant to assist drone-based broadband to serve students in Eagle River

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MADISON — Gov. Tony Evers today with the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC) and the Public Service Commission (PSC) announced the WEDC will provide a \$100,000 Capacity Building Grant to the Forest County Economic Development Partnership for a pilot program testing a tethered, drone-based system to provide high-speed internet in rural areas.

A key part of that test kicks off today with the announcement of a partnership between Wisconsin TeleLift and the Northland Pines School District. The six-month project will use Wisconsin TeleLift's tethered drone platforms fitted with cell phone towers to provide high-speed internet access to the roughly 10 percent of district students who currently have none.

"Just as this past year has demonstrated, access to high-speed internet is a necessity and critical to how we live, learn, and work. It's the key that opens the door to new opportunities for our students, our communities, and our state, and will be vital to our state's economic bounce back," said Gov. Evers. "That's why I declared 2021 the Year of Broadband Access and proposed the largest state investment in broadband ever, and I look forward to this creative and innovative pilot program to help some of our most rural students get connected."

Gov. Evers' 2021-23 budget provides a record nearly \$200 million in funding for broadband, including \$150 million toward broadband infrastructure in underserved areas. Broadband expansion has been identified as a top economic development

priority in WEDC's Wisconsin Tomorrow report, the report of the Governor's Blue Ribbon Commission on Rural Prosperity, and the Governor's Task Force on Rural Broadband.

"Access to broadband is really about access to opportunity," said Missy Hughes, WEDC secretary and CEO. "As has been shown again and again over the past year, reliable, high-speed internet is a necessity for everyone's education, healthcare and business."

"Public-private partnerships and innovative ideas like this are going to be critical to get everyone in our state connected," said PSC Chairperson Rebecca Cameron Valcq. "Only by using all of the tools in the toolbox will we be able to get access to those who need it now."

The TeleLift pilot program will test a system originally designed to catch poachers in South Africa's game reserves to see if it can help students in Wisconsin's Northland Pines School District complete their homework and connect to their school's resources.

Wisconsin TeleLift uses 4G or 5G cellular to provide service. The company's technology has already been used to help support firefighter communications during the California wildfires and two units have been put to use in Kenya to provide cell and internet access for refugee camps.

The Northland Pines School District, based in Eagle River, serves more than 1,300 students over 435 square miles in Vilas and Oneida counties. Superintendent Scott Foster said that while the district provides all students with Chromebooks and can provide hotspots, not all students are able to use them at home and parts of the district still lack cell service.

The district has strengthened its wifi networks in school buildings so students and families can use the network from their vehicles in the parking lot or in good weather at picnic tables outside, Foster said. But it's far from a perfect system for a rural school district that prides itself on preparing students for a competitive economy. He estimates more than 10 percent of students have no access to broadband.

Wisconsin TeleLift founders Scott Williams and his wife, Greta, were working with a nonprofit doing conservation work in 2014 when they began using drones to help

protect wildlife from poachers. A student who worked with them on the platform helped the couple see the larger potential behind the idea.

The couple began working to apply the technology to rural Wisconsin when they moved here a few years ago.

“The whole concept is we can now do dynamic networks as needed,” said Wisconsin TeleLift CEO Scott Williams. “We don’t replace infrastructure. We’re replacing the mindset that you have to have permanent infrastructure. We think it’s a truly disruptive technology.”

The system is designed to be highly portable and can be set up in minutes once it arrives on site.

That portability will allow the district to move the platforms around to see where the service works best and even evaluate where to possibly invest in permanent infrastructure. The experimentation and testing may even provide additional lessons for the district’s students, Foster said.

Developer Carl Ruedebusch, who formerly served as chairman of the Vilas County Economic Development Corporation and who now serves on WEDC’s Entrepreneurship and Innovation Committee, also contributed \$100,000 to the pilot through his Eye on Entrepreneurs Network.

“The future is still these young kids and we can’t have them not having access to the internet,” Ruedebusch said. “If this proves out, then it’s replicable in any school district.”