

# Sen. Marklein: Capitol update: Billions and billions and billions for broadband

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Broadband expansion continues to be one of my top priorities. I have continually championed funding and policies that have encouraged broadband expansion into unserved and underserved communities in Wisconsin.

In the last year, a tremendous amount of public funding for broadband expansion has been allocated to Wisconsin through several federal programs. This is on top of funding Wisconsin taxpayers have spent on the program and previous federal programs before the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to understand the breadth of broadband expansion investment in Wisconsin, I requested an analysis of both state and federal funding for broadband.

As of today, more than \$2.8 Billion has been allocated to Wisconsin for broadband. **\$2.8 BILLION.**

State funding and federal funds that are distributed through the state program accounts for approximately \$1.4 billion. State taxpayers have invested \$73 million since fiscal year 2014. Federal coronavirus funds for broadband expansion account for approximately \$1.3 billion. This includes an estimated deluge of \$1.1 billion in the most recent Federal Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act.

In addition to funding flowing through the state, the Federal government has made direct investments into telecommunications companies worth \$1.5 billion. This includes programs such as the Connect American Fund (CAF), the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Reconnect program and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Rural Digital Opportunity Fund (RDOF).

On top of all of the public funding from the state and federal government, there is a tremendous amount of private funding from telecommunications companies that is invested in tandem with these programs. Nearly every government broadband expansion grant program requires a private-dollar match.

In our communities, telecommunications providers like the Reedsburg Utility Commission, the Richland-Grant Coop and Lynnx have invested millions to match Wisconsin Broadband Grant funds. More than \$13 million in private funding has matched \$9 million in state taxpayer funds for 29 projects since 2014.

Charter Communications was awarded \$168 million in RDOF funds from the federal government and will be matching with \$668 million in private funding. They plan to reach 143,000 unserved homes and small businesses in Wisconsin with these funds over the next several years.

In addition to private funding from telecommunications companies, municipalities, counties and other local entities are also providing matching funds to expand broadband. It is fair to say that there are billions and billions and billions of dollars for broadband in Wisconsin.

While there is incredible investment in broadband in Wisconsin, it is important to understand the physical limitations of broadband expansion. It is not as simple as flipping a switch.

In July 2020, I spent a day job shadowing with the Reedsburg Utility Commission to better understand the fiber broadband construction process. I was very fortunate to observe a project near my home in Spring Green that was partially funded with Rural Broadband Expansion Grant funds. There are many, many steps in the fiber network construction process. This is why it costs nearly \$35,000 per mile for fiber connections in rural areas and takes a team of people to build the infrastructure.

Building fiber and expanding broadband is a time consuming, expensive process that is very weather and labor dependent. In Wisconsin we have challenges with both. The construction season is significantly impacted by weather and temperature. Our workforce challenges continue as well.

Like many industries, telecommunications companies are struggling to hire and train people to build the broadband infrastructure that we are trying to invest in. Many companies have openings and are offering incentives to attract workers they

can train to take advantage of the billions and billions and billions of dollars being invested in Wisconsin.

They are also struggling with supply chains for the technology, materials and equipment that they need to expand. Fiber needs to come from somewhere. Every team that is building infrastructure needs equipment. There are shortages throughout the country.

Again, we have billions and billions and billions for broadband expansion in Wisconsin. Our states' telecommunications companies are working hard – and quickly – to expand in Wisconsin. I will continue to work on this issue and dial-in state investments to reach unserved communities and expand broadband where we need it most.

For more information and to connect with me, visit my website <http://legis.wisconsin.gov/senate/17/marklein> and subscribe to my weekly E-Update by sending an email to [Sen.Marklein@legis.wisconsin.gov](mailto:Sen.Marklein@legis.wisconsin.gov). Do not hesitate to call 800-978-8008 if you have input, ideas or need assistance with any state-related matters.