

New North: Broadband Access Study shows strong desire for better internet

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10 strategic recommendations offered for improvement through community partnerships

NEW NORTH, February 24, 2022 – New North Inc., the regional economic development corporation serving the 18 counties of Northeast Wisconsin, today released the results of its Regional Broadband Access Study. The report, which reflects a strong desire for improved broadband service across every constituency, offers 10 strategic recommendations centering around the goal of delivering high-performance internet in all areas of the New North region.

Conducted over the final four months of 2021 by nationally recognized broadband planning firm Design Nine in partnership with Midwest-based consulting firms MSA and Geo Partners, the work was funded by a \$500,000 EDA CARES Act Recovery Assistance grant, announced in May 2021, and \$125,000 in matching local funds. The study included input from both households and businesses throughout the New North on existing broadband assets, and was gathered through paper and online surveys, plus in-person stakeholder meetings.

The study's survey data indicated that both New North residents and businesses value better internet service. Among the findings were:

- 50 percent of respondents are “dissatisfied” or “very dissatisfied” with their current internet speeds
- 88 percent of residents are interested in faster and more reliable internet service
- 96 percent believe that New North and/or local governments should help facilitate better internet access
- 35 percent of residents report the quality of internet service is affecting where they choose to live
- 98 percent of businesses indicated that the internet is important to the success of their business
- 71 percent of businesses reported that they need employees to be able to work from home

“We know that broadband has become essential community infrastructure, much as building and maintaining roads were in the early twentieth century,” says Barb LaMue, president and CEO of New North Inc. “Today, the advancement and support of digital road systems is critical to community and economic business development. Broadband use encompasses students and business people working from home, online shopping to meet the needs of everyday life and telehealth services, among many things.

“With its many quality assets – provided we have continued investment in broadband infrastructure – we know that the New North region can be attractive to business investment, along with an emerging population which is making choices about where they live primarily based on family needs and interests.”

The study’s recommendations include:

- **Development of a regional broadband strategy** by using the study’s findings to develop a multi-year set of goals that can be realistically achieved through a combination of local, state and federal funding sources
- That **county governments not become internet providers**, instead focusing on the development of public/private partnerships by making targeted

- investments in passive broadband infrastructure such as towers and dark fiber
- **Meeting the need for improved and affordable fiber and wireless** through improved service-provider access to more towers in the rural and underserved areas of the New North region; expanded fixed-point broadband wireless service is a critical, strategic short-term goal, but widespread access to wireless and fiber access is paramount to the long-term economic growth of the region
 - **Development of partnerships with Wireless Internet Service Providers (WISPs) and Internet Service Providers (ISPs)** for input on infrastructure investments to enable service expansion most efficiently
 - **Ordinance and planning changes**, focusing on conduit/fiber overlay plans, mapping of private-sector assets, integration of telecom into planning and permitting, an open-ditch policy, and the minimization of tower permitting costs
 - **The seeking of grant funds**, which have been steadily increasing through the federal government, particularly for underserved and unserved areas to construct new broadband infrastructure
 - **Management of community expectations**, knowing that current deficiencies developed over multiple decades and proposes improvements will be part of a multi-year process
 - **Development of a long-term funding strategy** through local revenue earmarks exclusively for broadband improvements
 - **Continued maintenance/support and promotion of the existing online speed test data website**, available at <https://expressoptimizer.net/test/>
 - **Establishment of a regional Middle Mile Network**, developed collaboratively by New North partners in order to significantly accelerate the availability of fiber to homes and businesses in the region, along with serving as a powerful economic-development tool that allows tech-oriented businesses to locate almost anywhere within the New North

Counties in the New North region will receive a detailed map of their county, along with an asset analysis of existing broadband and identification of where there are gaps in service. Virtual meetings with individual counties are being conducted over the weeks of Feb. 14, 21 and 28.

“We thank our many community partners for their help and participation in making the Regional Broadband Access Study a success, plus all residents who took time to complete the public survey and internet speed test, along with the engagement from existing Internet Service Providers in our region,” adds LaMue. “We appreciate the detailed work of Design Nine, MSA Professional Services and GEO Partners, in concert with Barbara Koldos of our team, to deliver a custom plan to New North and the counties we serve. We look forward to now implementing the plan’s recommendations through collaboration with county and municipal leaders, businesses in the region and broadband service providers.”

The Regional Broadband Access Study of the 18 counties within the New North region was conducted by [Design Nine](#) of Blacksburg, Va., with Midwest- and locally based partners [MSA Professional Services](#) and [GEO Partners LLC](#), beginning in early fall of 2021. It included meetings with stakeholders and interested parties throughout the region; interviews and meetings with businesses, county officials and Internet Service Providers; and the analysis of broadband surveys received from residents and businesses.

The work included asset assessment and analysis; market, current use and gap analysis; broadband surveys; connectivity solutions; regional Middle Mile strategy; infrastructure funding and grant opportunities; risks, legal and regulatory considerations; and network operations considerations.

The executive summary of the report and the full regional report are available on the New North website at <https://www.thenewnorth.com/broadband-access>. Each of the 18 county individualized reports will be made available in March following the conclusion of the county-level meetings to finalize the detailed information.