

Howard Marklein: Bridging the digital divide: The bright future of broadband in Wisconsin

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Broadband access in Wisconsin is extremely important to me. As the State Senator for District 17, I have been involved in efforts to expand broadband access for not only the people in southwestern Wisconsin, but across the entire state, especially those in rural communities who need it most. I have been actively working on rural broadband expansion for the last 10 years, including several bills that refine the rural Broadband Expansion Grant Program. This program provides funding for projects that improve broadband access in Wisconsin's rural communities, and has been instrumental in ensuring Wisconsin's rural communities are not left behind in the digital age.

The Wisconsin State Senate and Assembly recently passed Senate Bill (SB) 325 with strong bi-partisan support. I co-authored this bill with Rep. Rob Summerfield (R-Bloomer). Our legislation once again updates the rural Broadband Expansion Grant Program to close the digital divide in Wisconsin. It reforms the program to further dial-in funding and focus on the areas that are unserved.

The digital world is evolving and the demands for faster internet speeds and more reliable connections continue to grow. We must adapt our approach to broadband expansion in order to keep pace with these changes. One of the primary focuses of SB 325 is to update the definition of broadband by increasing the minimum download and upload speeds that qualify. This legislation ensures that we align our standards with the modern digital age, guaranteeing that rural Wisconsinites can access the same opportunities and resources as their urban counterparts.

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However, the heart of this legislation lies in its commitment to reaching those communities that currently lack broadband access completely. In its current form, the rural Broadband Expansion Grant Program directs funding to underserved communities, which are already served by broadband providers. So while some communities receive even more broadband access, some communities are left without any. This is why SB 325 instead directs state broadband grant dollars exclusively toward projects in unserved communities. This strategic shift represents a crucial step forward by allowing us to target the root of the problem rather than enabling an unfair overbuilding in served communities.

Moreover, our solution aims to prevent the duplication of public broadband resources. By coordinating efforts and sharing resources, we can maximize the impact of every dollar invested in broadband expansion. This responsible fiscal approach ensures that taxpayer dollars are spent wisely, delivering the best possible results for our communities. SB 325 also addresses affordability by requiring grants to participate in the FCC's Affordable Connectivity Program.

Since we launched the rural Broadband Expansion Grant Program in 2014, Wisconsin has made significant strides in expanding broadband access. More than \$2.8 billion has been invested in broadband expansion, reflecting our state's commitment to closing the digital divide. Federal funding has also played a significant role in bolstering Wisconsin's broadband expansion efforts. The Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) program allocated more than \$1 billion to our state, a clear acknowledgment of the importance of broadband access. SB 325 ensures that we align our state's efforts with these federal funds, to make certain that they are serving Wisconsinites in the most effective way.

I want to emphasize that our work is far from over. Rural broadband expansion remains an ongoing mission, and SB 325 represents a vital tool in our continued efforts. This bill reflects an unwavering commitment to ensuring that every Wisconsinite has access to high-quality broadband internet. I am hopeful that the Governor will sign this legislation to continue dialing-in our program. Together, we can bridge the digital divide and build a more connected, prosperous, and inclusive Wisconsin for all.

-Marklein, R-Spring Green, is co-chair of the Joint Finance Committee and

represents the 17th Senate District.