

# Howard Marklein: The long story of rural broadband infrastructure

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My neighbors and I on Soeldner Road in the Town of Spring Green just got fiber broadband access in our homes! Up until this time, some of us could get fixed wireless broadband, but not all of us. Now, we all have access to gigabit fiber broadband via Lightspeed and the Reedsburg Utility Commission (RUCLS)!

While I am thrilled that we finally are connected to reliable and fast broadband, I also recognize that there are a lot of people in our communities who still don't have access. As your State Senator, I continue to work with the Public Service Commission (PSC) and telecommunications providers to find ways to connect more people swiftly.

Money is not the problem at this time. More than \$1 billion has been allocated for Wisconsin by the Federal government through the Broadband Equity, Access and Deployment (BEAD) program. The PSC is currently working on the plan for how these funds will be distributed in Wisconsin.

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The problems now are planning, supply chains, workforce, weather and the time it takes to actually install the technology in our communities.

As my fiber connection was activated, I talked with leadership at RUCLS about the path they took to get to where we are today. My home is in Phase III of the RUCLS River Valley project. It has taken nearly six years, since this project was born, to reach my home. I am not complaining, I am simply trying to convey the long story of rural broadband expansion so that you understand what it takes to build

infrastructure and connect people.

Phase III of the River Valley RUCLS project, which was just turned up, was funded in the 2021 Wisconsin Broadband Expansion Grant Cycle. The application was submitted on December 1, 2020 and the grant was awarded on March 9, 2021. However, the planning for this phase started long before that.

On March 9, 2021, RUCLS received a grant for \$334,300 and provided matching funds worth \$652,000 to pay for the \$986,300 project. At application time, they planned to cover approximately 30 roadway miles in the northeastern quarter of the Town of Spring Green, passing 210 residences and 1 business.

Prior to starting Phase III, RUCLS had to finish projects in Phase II in order to be eligible for the Phase III funding. However, this also sped up the Phase III project because the feed fibers for Phase III came through and were part of Spring Green Phase II.

Phase II received a grant in the 2020 grant cycle worth \$542,500. RUCLS brought matching funds worth \$943,500 to a total project worth \$1.4 million! Phase I started with a grant award in 2019 for \$305,500 that matched \$464,450 in private investment.

My point is that even though RUCLS received significant Rural Broadband Expansion Grant funding from the State of Wisconsin, it takes time to actually build the infrastructure. On July 23, 2020, I spent a day with the fiber crew putting in Phase I as a part of my Hire Howard Job Shadow experience. I had a first-hand experience with splicing fiber, burying conduit and the inner workings of the fiber network. I understand why this all takes time.

According to RUCLS, there are new challenges for telecommunications providers who are working quickly to expand broadband. They told me that some are experiencing delays related to contractor availability, permitting, supply chain, acquiring matching funding and weather.

They also expressed some concerns about how all of these same challenges will be exacerbated by the deluge of Federal money going into broadband expansion nationwide. They are already battling supply chain issues and know that it is going to get worse when there are billions more dollars chasing the same supplies.

Regardless of the challenges, RUCLS and other telecommunications companies in the 17th Senate District continue to forge ahead with expansion. As consumers, we need to keep in mind that it may take years for a project. Again, the project that just reached my home was designed pre-2018, received a grant in 2021 and took two years to finish.

It's a long story, but it's absolutely worth it.

*-Marklein, R-Spring Green, is co-chair of the Joint Finance Committee and represents the 17th Senate District.*