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Senator says broadband funding offers chance for bipartisanship

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The chair of the state Senate Utilities and Technology Committee says the unprecedented level of broadband funding coming to Wisconsin presents a chance for bipartisanship.

Speaking Friday at a conference in Brookfield hosted by the Wireless Internet Service Providers Association, Sen. Julian Bradley noted the state could see as much as $1.2 billion for broadband from one element of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. The federal law's Broadband Equity, Access and Deployment Program provides more than $42 billion nationwide for projects aimed at expanding high-speed internet access.

"So there's a significant amount of money that's going to be coming in," the Franklin Republican said. "How that's going to be spent? Where that's going to be spent? There's a lot of questions about that and divided government certainly poses an opportunity for both parties to come together."

He added broadband access is important for every Senate and Assembly district in the state, and said he and his Dem colleagues in the GOP-dominated Legislature have a solid working relationship with open lines of communication.

But he acknowledged the challenge that some legislators "may have very different ideas" about how federal funding should be used than Dem. Gov Tony Evers. He urged attendees to advocate with their representatives in the Legislature, the state Public Service Commission, the Wisconsin Broadband Office and the governor's office.

"If we get enough money to cover almost everything, then the question isn't which projects, it's what order?" he said. "When do we get to those people? And that's the next question that needs to be answered."

Bradley argued broadband funding should be prioritized for rural areas with few to no options, rather than "completely upgrading" infrastructure for areas that are

already connected.

“The focus should be, and hopefully will continue to be, on getting to rural customers … It is just absolutely critical and crucial that we get our rural folks connected to the internet so they don’t fall too far behind,” he said, pointing to the state’s western and northern regions in particular.

When asked about adding a state requirement for matching funds for broadband projects, Bradley said he liked the idea of communities having “skin in the game” with investment from all parties. But he emphasized the importance of flexibility in funding allocation, and said the PSC should be trusted as an expert steward.

He explained the state’s broadband grant program doesn’t spell out a specific requirement for matching funds. While projects that do include such funding are weighed more heavily in a scoring framework, he said, those that don’t aren’t automatically disqualified.

“With the amount of money that’s coming in … we are going to get close to full connectivity — as close as we can imagine, anyway,” he said. “And the people that we don’t hit, the few that we miss, are going to be special on-off projects that we’re going to need that additional flexibility.”

See more on the BEAD funding coming to the state:
https://psc.wi.gov/Pages/ServiceType/Broadband/InternetForAll.aspx

–By Alex Moe