



TONY KURTZ

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 50th ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

Broadband for All

We have the opportunity to do something groundbreaking for rural Wisconsin – and here’s how we can make it happen.

Wisconsin is set to receive \$3.2 billion in federal stimulus money. It’s important to me that the state invest that money wisely on projects that will have a lasting impact. While there are restrictions as to how the money can be spent, it’s clear that some infrastructure projects – including water, sewer, and broadband – qualify for these funds. If we invest \$500 million of the federal money into the state’s existing broadband grant program, which requires matching funds be provided by private industry, we could see a \$1 billion investment in our state’s unserved rural communities. It is estimated that with these funds and previously announced broadband funding, we could cover approximately 97% of the state with high-speed internet.

The pandemic has shown the world what we in rural communities already knew – lack of access to the high-speed internet puts us at a competitive disadvantage. As many city folks traveled to rural areas to find solace, it became quite apparent that rural communities offered a refuge from stress, but not the connectivity that they took for granted. Large urban centers have high speed internet that allowed for virtual learning, working from home, and many other economic advantages that quite frankly rural communities struggle to offer.

In Wisconsin, the Governor proposes a budget, but it’s the legislature that assembles the version that finally reaches the Governor’s desk. This past week the Wisconsin Legislature passed a bill that would enable us to have the same oversight over these federal dollars, however Governor Evers vetoed the bill. Unless something changes, the Governor and his administration will have sole discretion over where this money goes. Earlier this year, he declared that 2021 would be the “Year of Broadband,” and he proposed a \$200 million investment in high-speed internet. I’m asking him to go bigger and bolder.

More than a half a decade ago, my predecessor – Representative Ed Brooks – spearheaded the Rural Wisconsin Initiative, which sought to draw attention to the needs of people living outside of Madison and Milwaukee. One of the pillars of that legislative package was broadband expansion. He initially proposed a bill that would have increased the amount spent on broadband from \$1.5 million to \$10 million over the course of a budget cycle. While that bill did not pass, he would later co-sponsor a bill with Senator Howard Marklein that made an even bigger investment in high-speed internet, an investment that we nearly doubled again last budget cycle. Now, we can finish the job. I’m asking Governor Evers to use the federal money – our tax dollars – to connect our state and bring equal opportunity to rural Wisconsin.