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# HOWARD MARKLEIN

STATE SENATOR • 17<sup>TH</sup> SENATE DISTRICT

## Capitol Update

By Senator Howard Marklein

May 14, 2021

### Dialing-In Funding for Broadband

I recently drafted legislation to dial-in the Wisconsin Rural Broadband Expansion Grant program to reach more unserved communities and continue expanding critical broadband infrastructure in Wisconsin. This is the third time the legislature has revised the program to fine-tune the way we approach broadband expansion and I am proud to lead these efforts.

Broadband expansion continues to be one of my top priorities. We have made tremendous progress in Wisconsin and with this progress comes the need to refine the Rural Broadband Expansion grant program and our efforts to continue expanding into the communities that need our support. The changes in this legislation, written with stakeholders, keep the grant program nimble so that we are reaching the truly unserved in Wisconsin.

The Rural Broadband Expansion Grant Program was created in 2013 to encourage broadband expansion into Wisconsin's unserved and underserved areas. The program has awarded 268 grants totaling more than \$72.5 million in investment since it began. The most recent grant cycle awarded 58 projects worth \$28.4 million.

Over time, the grant program has evolved to meet Wisconsin's broadband expansion needs. Since its inception, the grant program has been adjusted to better collaborate with stakeholders, direct funding to the areas of greatest need and build accountability. This bill makes several adjustments to further refine the Rural Broadband Expansion Grant program to continue focusing our efforts to expand broadband into truly unserved communities and ensure that Wisconsin taxpayer investments make a difference. We must evolve as we continue to meet our goals and reach new areas of the state.

Highlights of this bill include:

- Eliminating the "underserved" category to focus on truly unserved communities. It also redefines "unserved" to be broadband delivered at speeds of 100 Mbps down and 20 Mbps up or less, which better matches reality and the actual expectations of consumers who are learning and working from home.
- Giving priority to expansion projects that have at least 50% matching funds and setting a 40% match minimum.
- Giving priority to projects that offer speeds at 900 Mbps or greater.

- Creating measurable accountability by requiring a final report after project completions to ensure advertised speeds are accurate and the project is reaching subscribers.
- Requiring the Public Service Commission (PSC) to provide technical support to local project champions and to facilitate relationships and connections with internet service providers.
- Requiring the PSC to develop and provide educational tools for project champions to design projects and apply for grants.
- Requiring each internet service provider that receives a grant to disclose their coverage availability data to the PSC by April 1st of each year to improve coverage mapping for future grant distribution.

As the state budget discussion moves forward, we will be discussing the potential for broadband funding. I continue to seek more information from Governor Tony Evers to understand how he may – or may not – fund broadband expansion with federal funds from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). My colleagues and I have offered the Governor several days for a meeting with us and he declined.

I am going to keep working on this. We need to fund broadband expansion. But we need to do it in a meaningful way that reaches the communities that are unserved and disconnected. The legislation I recently circulated dials-in the grant program to focus on these communities.

As always, please do not hesitate to connect with me to provide input, ideas or to seek assistance. Send an email to [sen.marklein@legis.wisconsin.gov](mailto:sen.marklein@legis.wisconsin.gov) or call 608-266-0703.