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STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 70TH ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

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Rural Prosperity Roundtable Reflections

Last week, I had the distinct honor to participate in a Rural Prosperity Roundtable discussion, hosted by the United States Department of Agriculture. I was invited to participate by Frank Frassetto, State Director for USDA Rural Development in Wisconsin. The event was coined as the first roundtable discussion of its kind in the United States and took place at Ripon College. It involved representatives from the USDA, our State Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection (DATCP), the state Public Service Commission, the Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Association Foundation, private industry representatives, individuals from the Great Lakes Intertribal Council, county executives and congressional representatives, among others.

I commend our State USDA for bringing together such a broad group of stakeholders and representatives to discuss what initiatives are currently happening in Rural Wisconsin, what issues are important for Rural Wisconsin to prosper, and ways that the private and public sector can work together to help Rural Wisconsin move forward. Some highlights of the discussion included Anne Hazlett, Assistant to the Secretary for Rural Development at the USDA, referencing USDA's "Rural Prosperity Report" which organizes over 100 actions to move rural America forward, including five key indicators, including: e-connectivity for rural America, improving quality of life, supporting the rural workforce, harnessing technological innovation, and economic development.

Dan Smith, an experienced dairy farmer and current Administrator of the Division of Agriculture Development at our state Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection, talked about the local relationship to international commerce and this now third year of economic downturn in agriculture. Mr. Smith discussed how commodities are suffering from low pricing, succession planning for farms, and innovation in the industry including things like specialty cheese products produced in partnership with the Center for Dairy Research at UW-Madison. Angie Dickinson, our Public Service Commission State Broadband Director, discussed the Broadband Expansion Program and our state's Broadband Forward program, highlighting public and private partnerships. Much of the overall discussion surrounded connectivity and broadband access for Rural Wisconsin. Christina Danforth, CEO of the Great Lakes Intertribal Council, highlighted the need for good, clean housing, education, and healthcare in tribal communities and the amount of poverty experienced in many tribal communities. She also discussed some of the special cultural barriers that exist in tribal communities relating to the stigma attached with mental health issues and the importance of the extended family in tribal communities.

Tomah Memorial Hospital's CEO, Phil Stuart, discussed their organizations collaboration with Gunderson Health and Mayo clinic and the recent addition of their oncology clinic. In addition, tele-medicine benefits and challenges were discussed, as well as what healthcare providers can do to optimize existing facilities and do to access capital to fund new projects. I was ecstatic that Phil was invited and able to



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attend the event for a variety of reasons, including the critical role hospitals and healthcare providers play in our local communities and the essential importance of access to quality healthcare in rural areas.

On my end, I shared information about the Rural Wisconsin Initiative, an ongoing effort I'm a part of that includes a number of outstate legislators from rural areas across our state, focused around improving education, workforce development, technology, and healthcare in our rural communities. I touched on the interstate medical licensure compact that I authored last session and the enhanced nurse licensure compact that I authored this legislative session. Both of those pieces of legislation help to increase access to healthcare in rural areas and have been passed and signed into law by the Governor. This was all in addition to the successes achieved in this session's state budget related to investments in K-12 education, mental health, and broadband funding, and the work I've undertaken this legislative session as chair of the Assembly Committee on Rural Development and Mining, ranging from allowing additional grant access for our rural libraries, investing in the recruitment and retention of allied health and advanced practice clinicians to rural areas of our state, to Telecommuter Forward Certification to allow communities the ability to help promote telecommuting opportunities and broadband access locally.

For me, the good news is that I don't have to travel over to Ripon or anywhere else to stay connected to Rural Wisconsin and advocate for issues that matter to us in our rural communities. I am committed to continuously learning from you, your friends, your family members, and your co-workers how we can productively continue the discussion together and achieve results that matter. There are a number of successes that have been achieved so far, but there's more work to do to together to move Rural Wisconsin forward.

Nancy VanderMeer represents the 70th Wisconsin State Assembly District, which includes portions of Monroe, Jackson, Portage and Wood counties, and is the current chair of the Assembly Committee on Rural Development and Mining.