



## WISCONSIN LEGISLATURE

P.O. BOX 8952 • MADISON, WI 53708

# Bridging the Gap in Rural Wisconsin

January 13, 2016

Rural Wisconsin is filled with excellent places to live, work, and raise a family. However, this state's small towns and villages are not exempt from the American demographic trends of the last fifty years. Many rural counties are losing population or barely maintaining population. When young people leave for jobs in the city, or senior citizens choose to retire to the suburbs, our communities become caught in a downward spiral of decreasing vitality. As Representatives of rural Wisconsin, we are working to bridge the urban-rural gap, and to start a conversation about building our future.

We are introducing the Rural Wisconsin Initiative. This plan will be ongoing, and will incorporate legislative suggestions from people across the state. Together, we can make the changes that will ensure the vibrancy of our communities for decades to come. To begin the discussion, we have drafted seven bills that will improve education, health care, industry, and technology in rural Wisconsin.

The first bill will increase available broadband expansion grant funds from \$1.5 million to \$10 million per budget. Rural areas are still woefully underserved when it comes to high speed internet, and this affects the abilities of our children to prepare for school, inhibits communication between ambulances and hospitals, and can be a determining factor in where businesses choose to locate. Bridging the technology gap ensures that people in rural areas have the same access to opportunity that people in urban or suburban areas do.

Of course, opportunity begins with a solid education, and education begins with quality teachers. Currently, there is a nationwide teacher shortage, and rural areas are feeling that shortage most acutely. Following the recommendation of the Speaker's Task Force on Rural Education, we are proposing the expansion of a loan repayment program for teachers, so that those who serve rural communities can be included. Additionally, we are proposing the establishment of a grant for STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) education development in small rural schools. This will help develop tomorrow's workforce today.

Many young people in rural Wisconsin are under the false impression that they need to move to the city in order to get a good job. There are many family supporting jobs available in rural areas, and we need to promote that fact. That is why we are introducing legislation to expand funding for both youth apprenticeship grants and tuition reimbursement programs for apprentices. Increasingly, rural high schools, tech colleges, and businesses are working together to equip young people with the skills they need to succeed in our homegrown industries, as well as the opportunity to earn college credit for their work. We feel the need to increase funding to these programs to meet the growing demand, and to close the skills gap that has left many rural industries unable to find the employees they need to thrive.

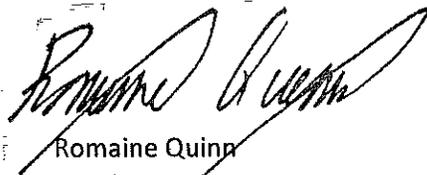
In addition to retaining young Wisconsinites, we also need to increase our efforts to attract out of state young people. That is why we are introducing a bill, modeled on legislation from Kansas and Oklahoma, which will assist in student loan repayment for those who choose to relocate to Wisconsin. Our bill would repay up to \$25,000 or 40% of student loans, provided the recipient have a post-secondary degree, be employed, and not be on any form of public assistance. Young families increase the tax base, keep our schools full, and provide the talented workforce we need to keep Wisconsin economically strong.

Not only do we want people to live and work in rural Wisconsin; we want them to stay and retire here as well. Just as access to employment is an important factor in where young people choose to live, access to health care means more to senior citizens. That is why we are proposing a funding expansion to the Wisconsin Rural Physician Residency Assistance Program (WRPRAP). WRPRAP funds residency programs at rural hospitals, which encourage young doctors to put down roots in our communities. Additionally, some of the expanded funding would go toward bridging the gap for women's health services by training physicians in obstetrics and gynecology.

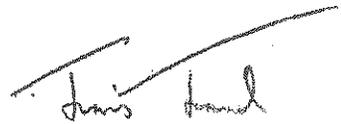
Building the future in rural Wisconsin is a process, and one that needs citizen input. As we wrote earlier, we want the Rural Wisconsin Initiative to begin a conversation, and to be a continuing reflection of what our constituents want. Please share your feedback and ideas at [www.RuralWisconsinInitiative.com](http://www.RuralWisconsinInitiative.com).



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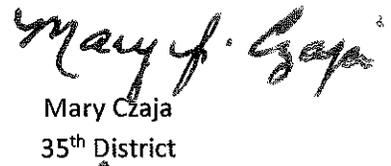
Travis Tranel  
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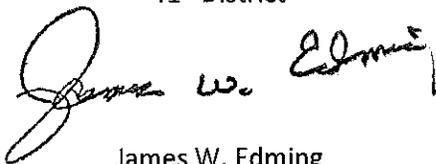
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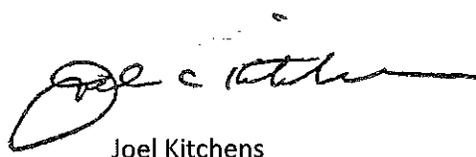
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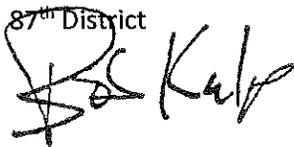
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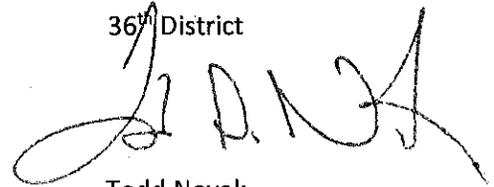
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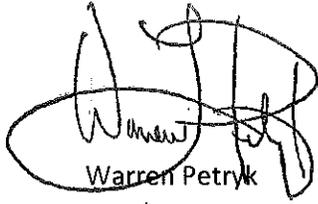
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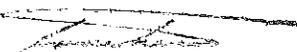
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Rob Swearingen  
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Gary Tauchen  
6<sup>th</sup> District



Nancy VanderMeer  
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