



Wisconsin State Legislature

FOR MORE INFORMATION
CONTACT: LUTHER OLSEN (800) 991-5541

November 15, 2016

Expanding Broadband Access in Wisconsin

High-speed internet access, or broadband access, is critical for much of life in the twenty-first century. Students of all ages use it to access learning material, take courses and communicate with other students. Businesses of all shapes and sizes need broadband, from a farmer who uses the Internet for weather forecasts or to market their product to a large multi-national company that conducts business with partners across the globe. More and more, we use the Internet for entertainment including streaming videos, gaming and connecting with friends and family. These types of uses: education, business and entertainment require high-speed internet to be fully functional. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) estimates the minimum transmission speed needed for common uses to be between 0.5 and 4 Mbps (megabits per second). They also establish a benchmark speed for broadband access to be fully accessible for modern uses of 25 Mbps for downloads and 3 Mbps for uploads.

In Wisconsin, 98.9 percent of urban residents have access to broadband service, but the same cannot be said of some rural areas. Only 56.4 percent of residents in rural areas have the same access. As one Town of Dane official said in an e-mail to me, "The Information Superhighway here is more of a gravel road."

To address this disparity, the 2013-15 state budget established a grant program to provide funding for broadband expansion in underserved areas of the state. The Broadband Grant Expansion Program is administered by the Public Service Commission's State Broadband Office. The office is responsible for determining which areas of the state are underserved, designing,

evaluating and prioritizing grant applications, as well as awarding grants. To date, the Broadband Grant Expansion Project has awarded \$2.4 million in grants to 25 projects that impact consumers in 19 counties. There are additional grant and loan programs available through the federal government.

In the last legislative session, a new law was enacted to give communities the option of becoming Broadband Forward! communities by establishing local ordinances that provides an efficient process for reviewing applications and issuing permits necessary to expand broadband access to their residents. Although this legislation did not give Broadband Forward! communities priority under the grant program, it puts them in a better position to move forward on projects if they receive a grant.

This summer, the Joint Legislative Council established a study committee to review the grant program and see if it has encouraged construction of broadband infrastructure in underserved areas. The committee also looked at the criteria the State Broadband Office uses to evaluate grant applications and determining eligibility. The committee was also asked to consider other ways to encourage broadband expansion.

The Joint Legislative Council Study Committee is proposing legislation to expand eligibility, clarify evaluation of grant application, and specifies how the grants should be funded in the future. They are proposing that school districts be allowed to apply for grants if they partner with a telecommunications company or an organization. Their proposal also creates two new priority criteria by specifying that priority should be given to projects that do not duplicate broadband service infrastructure projects that will not result in a delay in providing broadband service to neighboring areas. This legislation may be considered in the next legislative session, starting in January.

The Wisconsin State Broadband Office is conducting a survey of residential and business internet access to help state planners understand the need for improved Internet access in the state. The survey is open until December 31, 2016 and can be accessed through this link: <http://www.psc.wi.gov/BroadbandSurvey.htm>. Broadband access is an important part of

economic development in the state, particularly for rural areas. I look forward to continuing to work on expanding access during our state budget deliberations and as the Legislative Council study committee's legislation is considered. For more information on the Broadband Expansion Grants, visit the State Broadband Office's website at

<http://psc.wi.gov/utilityinfo/tele/broadband/grants/bbGrantApplicationPage.htm>.

If you have any questions about any of the information I have included or if you have suggestions on other topics or issues you would like learn more about, you may call my office toll-free at (800) 991-5541; write me at P.O. Box 7882, Madison, WI 53707; or e-mail me at:

Sen.Olsen@legis.state.wi.us. You can also sign up for our newsletter at our website:

<http://www.legis.state.wi.us/senate/sen14/news/index.htm>.

#30#