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STATE SENATOR • 17TH SENATE DISTRICT

Capitol Update

By Senator Howard Marklein

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Broadband Expansion for Rural Wisconsin

Over the last several weeks, I have co-hosted broadband meetings in Grant and Lafayette counties to learn about the needs of our rural communities and to make connections with the state's Broadband Expansion Grant program. This program is offering \$6 million in grant funds to communities to bring broadband technology to unserved and underserved areas of our state. The federal government has also launched the Connect American Fund (CAF) Phase II for 2015-2020. More than \$572 million has been awarded among AT&T, Centurylink and Frontier to "deploy broadband in unserved and underserved areas."

The state's Broadband Expansion Grant program is meant to offer financial subsidies to private companies to expand broadband technology to unserved and underserved parts of our state. Despite the significant need in the 17th Senate District, no communities applied for funding during the last two application cycles. Nearly \$3 million went to projects in other parts of our state while residents of the 17th Senate District are in the greatest need. I wanted to know why.

Installation of broadband technology is dependent on private telecommunications companies that base decisions on return on investment (ROI). In other words, the companies that offer these services must believe that they will receive a reasonable financial gain by installing infrastructure that offers services.

Unfortunately, broadband installation for many of our rural communities does not provide a positive ROI from a private-business perspective. Telecommunications companies tell us that they can bury fiber down every road for about \$30,000 per mile, but there is absolutely no guarantee that a majority of homes on a road will adopt the technology and it is highly unlikely that those who do will be willing to cover the costs to install it. I live on a dead end road in rural Spring Green that does not have fiber. I pay \$46 per month for wireless high speed internet. It meets my needs. I would not be willing to pay more for fiber.

The meetings this month included Angie Dickison, the State Broadband Director at the Public Service Commission (PSC), local economic development leaders, business owners and citizens. I learned that the investment of state dollars in broadband expansion needs to be studied and deployed in a more meaningful way in order to reach the people who need it. I want to insure that taxpayers are receiving strong ROI through this program and that it is meeting our goals. I recently requested a Legislative Council Study Committee to review the program and provide recommendations to insure that we are investing wisely where the investments are most needed.

The current application process requires public-private partnerships, local investment and a compelling case to receive grant funding. For example, a telecommunications company must partner with a public entity such as a township, to partially fund a specific project that meets the PSC's criteria.

Unfortunately, many communities struggle to apply because they don't know what to ask, with whom to work and how to proceed. Throughout these meetings, it became apparent that while we know communities need technological investment, most people do not fully understand the technology, the costs and the options available to them.

When most people think about "broadband," they imagine fiber optic wires connecting homes and businesses with a wider network. But that is not the only way for high-speed transmissions to be distributed in Wisconsin. Broadband technology can be offered in a variety of ways; buried fiber cables, over power lines (BoPL), wireless (Wi-Fi, WiMax, 1X, 3G, 4G), satellite, DOCSIS, DSL, and ISDN. Each type of broadband service has unique capabilities, specific benefits and a myriad of downsides

Buried fiber cables offer fast, consistent connections; but they are extremely expensive and require significant front-end investment by a telecommunications company without the guarantee of participation. Wireless is another option; but it has some topographical challenges, especially in the Driftless areas of the state. Likewise, satellite options are widely available; but struggle with dropped service during weather events.

Despite the confusing array of options for consumers, the need for high-speed internet capability is necessary for businesses, education and personal communications. Ready or not, most of us already communicate via the internet in one way or another. Whether we're sending an email, streaming video, sharing files or shopping online, the internet is our connection to other people, business opportunities, commerce, things we want to learn and experience, and stuff we want to buy.

The lack of connectivity is impacting the stability of our rural communities. Businesses need high-speed connections to do business. Individuals want – and need – high-speed connections for both professional and personal activities. As a result, young people are not returning to rural communities and businesses are struggling to remain competitive in a world that is becoming more technological every day.

The state Broadband Expansion program and the Federal CAF II funding are small steps toward bringing broadband to our communities. As your State Senator, I will continue to work with my colleagues, our communities and the telecommunications companies to insure that taxpayer investment in technology is meeting actual needs. If your community is in an unserved or underserved area, please do not hesitate to contact me and I will work with you to make connections and provide information.

For more information and to connect with me, visit my website <http://legis.wisconsin.gov/senate/17/marklein> and subscribe to my weekly E-Update by sending an email to Sen.Marklein@legis.wisconsin.gov. Do not hesitate to call 800-978-8008 if you have input, ideas or need assistance with any state-related matters.