



# NANCY VANDERMEER

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 70<sup>TH</sup> ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

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## Broadband Internet Access Made Top Priority for Rural Development Committee

Serving as Chairperson of the Assembly Committee on Rural Development is a role I take very seriously and one that I treat with an immense amount of responsibility. In Madison, there are a number of individuals, both elected and otherwise, although well meaning, that let's say, "don't necessarily place a top priority" on *what* issues impact those of us that live in rural communities throughout the state and *how* issues that affect everyone throughout the state uniquely affect those of us that live in rural communities. It's imperative that individuals and stakeholders, elected and otherwise, do everything they can to make sure that the voice of rural Wisconsin residents is part of every conversation pertaining to anything that would have an impact on rural Wisconsin families and their communities, and I'm more than happy to do my part in this pursuit.

As a committee chairperson, I have the discretion to guide the direction of my appointed committee. That means I have the opportunity to choose what pieces of legislation the committee will hold hearings on, what pieces of legislation the committee will vote on, and I have the opportunity to utilize an informational hearing format to bring in invited guests and speakers to help inform and engage committee members on topics that I deem important for the committee. As such, I made sure that broadband internet access was a top priority for the Rural Development Committee this session and the first issue we took a look at.

On May 30<sup>th</sup>, Angie Dickison-State Broadband Director for Wisconsin's Public Service Commission, Frank Frassetto-Wisconsin State Director for the United States Department of Agriculture's Office of Rural Development, Bill Esbeck-Executive Director for the Wisconsin State Telecommunications Association, and Jim Costello-Chief Executive Officer of Lynxx Networks (Camp Douglas), appeared before the 12 person committee to discuss where we've been, where we're at, and where we're currently going related to broadband internet access in the state.

As a committee, we were fortunate to have such a diverse group of individuals appear before us to present and address questions from committee members. For me, it was important to have state, federal, and private sector experts come in to address us because there is a lot of overlap between federal and state jurisdiction pertaining to this issue. In addition, I thought it was important to make sure that the private sector individuals and organizations best positioned to serve our rural areas - like Wisconsin State Telecommunications Association members such as Lynxx Networks - were part of the conversation.

A number of things were brought forward through committee discussion, including the fact that one of the first pieces of legislation I authored and passed as a State Representative, 2015 Assembly Bill 647,



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which allowed the Public Service Commission to fully allocate available grant funds to extend broadband access to underserved areas, is being put to good use. Wisconsin's Broadband Expansion Grant Program, which started out as a \$500,000 program in fiscal year 2014, has grown into a program that has awarded over \$9 million statewide to expand broadband service alone in the 2018 fiscal year.

The entirety of information shared and exchanged as a result of this hearing is unfortunately too much to articulate here, but some of the challenges, successes, weaknesses and strengths related to expanding access throughout the state were the primary points of interest. However, I know how important this issue is for our communities, so stay tuned for more information in the near future. That said, I can share that I'm extremely pleased that the legislature's Joint Finance Committee has recently included \$44 million for Rural Broadband Expansion Grants in this biennium's state budget. This investment will be able to distribute \$22 million per year over the biennium, and that's great news.

In the meantime, please do not hesitate to contact my office with any questions, comments, or concerns related to internet access. We have already put multiple local officials in touch with federal and state representatives that appeared at our recent hearing to address specific questions and make sure they're aware of state and federal programs that are available to help improve access locally. I'm here to help, however I can.

*Nancy VanderMeer represents the 70<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin State Assembly District, which includes portions of Monroe, Jackson, Portage and Wood counties.*