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Testimony in Support of Assembly Bill 239

Assembly Committee on Rural Development

April 6, 2021

Madam Chair and committee members, thank you for holding this public hearing today for Assembly Bill (AB) 239. This important legislation will invest \$500 million of the funds our state will be receiving from the federal government as a part of the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) in broadband expansion.

Throughout my time representing the people of the 87th Assembly District, one of the most common concerns that I hear about from the people I represent is the need for improved high-speed broadband access. Large parts of my district, like many parts of rural Wisconsin, do not have access to reliable high-speed internet and this hurts economic growth, limits educational opportunities, and diminishes the quality of life. This need became even clearer over the last year as many Wisconsinites were forced to work or learn from home. When schools closed last spring, I heard from a number of parents that their children were struggling with remote learning due to the lack of reliable internet access.

Over the past several budgets we have invested in increased funding for broadband expansion. However, even with that increased funding, when each round of broadband grants are announced, there are always a number of projects that go unfunded. I am sure that a number of my colleagues have heard from disappointed constituents like I have when proposed broadband projects are not funded in their area. In fact, one county I represent, Taylor, has gotten so tired of the lack of broadband access in their area that the county bonded to start laying some fiber themselves. The county applied for a broadband expansion grant in the most recent round of funding to build on this county investment, but unfortunately, their grant application was not approved.

The one-time influx of federal dollars our state will be receiving through ARPA provides us a unique opportunity to address a critical need in many parts of our state. By investing \$500 million into our state's broadband expansion grant program we will be going a long way to closing the broadband gap that exists in our state.

Madam Chair and committee members, I ask for your support of AB 239 and thank you again for the opportunity to testify before you today.