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# HOWARD MARKLEIN

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STATE SENATOR • 17<sup>TH</sup> SENATE DISTRICT

## Capitol Update

By Senator Howard Marklein

September 9, 2016

### *Collaborating to Connect Rural Wisconsin*

The Legislative Council Study Committee on Rural Broadband met again this week to continue our review and investigation into the Rural Broadband Expansion Grant program that is administered by the Public Service Commission (PSC). We pivoted from research and information gathering to discussion and decision-making about the future of the grant program in Wisconsin. To replay our full-day meeting, please visit [www.wiseye.org](http://www.wiseye.org). To view all of the information shared at the meeting, please visit: <http://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/misc/lc/study/2016/1496>.

As the Chair of the Study Committee, I have taken all of the information and ideas we discussed at our meeting and have given the Legislative Council instructions to draft legislation and some guidance documents to improve the grant program and further define legislative intent. Throughout our discussions, several themes and ideas were raised over and over again and we are working to address these issues.

The repeating themes challenged us to consider the difference between subsidizing a project to increase speed in a location that already has *some* service versus focusing solely on locations without any broadband access at all. We also engaged in an interesting discussion about the funding source for the program and whether the current source is an appropriate allocation of dollars. The committee also spent a lot of time discussing how our state program should be coordinated with Federal broadband programs.

Overall, I am optimistic about our ideas. We have spent a lot of time studying the effectiveness, impact and potential of the grant program. We have four years of grant program history to work with and a plethora of passionate community leaders who have partnered with a wide variety of telecommunications providers and agency staff to bring technology to the people of rural Wisconsin.

Many end-users, such as you and I in our homes and businesses, do not realize the time, effort, funds and collaboration that happens before we can turn on our computer and access the Internet. There are many people and hours devoted to connecting rural Wisconsin.

The most recent Rural Broadband Expansion Grant cycle has closed and two communities in the 17<sup>th</sup> Senate District were awarded grants for the 2017 cycle. The City of Dodgeville is partnered with MHTC and the Lafayette County Development Corporation has partnered with ComElec Internet Services to design two major projects in their communities to expand broadband to residents and businesses who do not have reasonable access.

In early 2016, I hosted meetings in Fennimore and Darlington to connect the PSC Broadband office with communities in counties of the 17<sup>th</sup> Senate District with limited access to consistent internet service. These meetings were driven by a recurring request from community leaders to find ways to improve broadband access for economic development and quality of life for their citizens.

I am proud that the meeting in Darlington inspired several community leaders to collaborate on a grant application. Luis Lopez, Executive Director of the Lafayette Development Corporation led a team with Lafayette County, the City of Darlington, ComElec Internet Services, LLC and the Southwestern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission (SWRPC) to bring broadband to seven underserved and unserved areas in Lafayette County. The total project cost is \$430,420 and the grant program will provide \$86,086. Approximately 80% of the project cost will be funded by local dollars from the EDC, Lafayette County, the City of Darlington, SWRPC and ComElec.

The Lafayette County project may be slightly amended, but the application lists the installation of towers in Blanchardville, Darlington, Gratiot, the Platteville Mound, Schuberts grain tower, South Wayne and Wiota. Among these locations, 3,098 households, 292 existing businesses and 174 potential business sites will be reached. This is an amazing potential impact and a lot of “bang for our buck!”

The City of Dodgeville and MHTC project was granted \$55,360 toward a total project cost of \$138,400. The project is targeted for “last mile” of infrastructure that currently does not exist. MHTC already provides wireline and wireless broadband service to much of Dodgeville, but this project extends their reach to the industrial park and future residential development locations. According to their application, the project will enable MHTC to reach eight existing businesses and 28 potential business sites. This is extremely important for economic development in Dodgeville.

I am proud of these two communities for their hard work to design projects and to apply for the Rural Broadband Expansion Grant program. I look forward to seeing the outcomes of their projects and am inspired to continue to find ways to invest the grants in meaningful projects that will have similar impact throughout the rural communities of Wisconsin.

If your community needs connections or support to improve broadband access, please contact my office. We will work to provide you with contacts and connections to help you assess your needs, determine your opportunities, share best practices and connect with the partners who can help you move forward.

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](mailto: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.

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