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STATE SENATOR • 17TH SENATE DISTRICT

Capitol Update

By Senator Howard Marklein

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Continued Focus on Rural Broadband Expansion

I recently attended a conference hosted by the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) focused on Broadband and Cable Policy. More than 50 legislators from many states gathered in Denver, Colorado to discuss one of the biggest challenges faced by states with rural communities – expanding rural broadband.

I visited with legislators from other rural states, such as Iowa, North Dakota, Montana, Kansas, Missouri, Wyoming, Arkansas and Alabama. We discussed our challenges, the programs and policies we are working on in our own states and learned about new technologies. I am proud of our efforts in Wisconsin! Our recent investment of \$48 million for new Rural Broadband Expansion Grants is well beyond the state investment being made in many other states. Our grant program is recognized, nationally, as a model for distributing funds to public-private partnerships efficiently and effectively!

However, I know we still have more work to do. While 80% of homes in the United States have access to very fast, 1 Gig internet service, this is simply not the case in rural Wisconsin and other rural communities throughout the nation. Every state, especially those with strong agricultural economies and vast geography, are managing this issue. We know that there is a direct correlation between access to broadband and economic development, academic success and student achievement. We need to expand.

While fiber optic broadband continues to be the gold standard for life span, longevity and speed, the speakers at the conference acknowledged that it is not always the answer, especially in rural communities. One mile of fiber in Wisconsin is estimated to cost between \$15,000-30,000. It is extremely difficult for anyone, private companies or public governments, to justify this expense. There is virtually no guaranteed return-on-investment for these dollars.

As a result, telecommunications companies and community leaders are turning to hybrid configurations mixing fiber to a central hub with fixed wireless distribution to individual locations. These hybrid solutions are delivering reliable faster speeds and can overcome the geography and terrain challenges. A community from North Dakota presented on this topic and discussed their use of grain bins, silos, houses and power polls to distribute fixed wireless from a fiber connected hub. This could be a good solution for several of our communities.

I also listened to a presentation about a Mayor in Kansas who took it upon himself to go door-to-door in his community to make the case for his citizens to commit to adopting broadband. This approach is called demand aggregation. He then was able to take strong data to a telecommunications provider to prove that if the company built broadband, the adoption would happen. Our smaller, rural communities struggle to quantify the demand for various speeds of broadband. Adoption of technology – and those willing to pay for it – is almost always a challenge. This Mayor overcame the issue by doing the tough legwork and

making the case. But he owned the challenge. Community champions are an essential piece of the rural broadband expansion game. I will be working on tools to support community champions.

I also learned about new efforts that are in the works to better map the availability of broadband in the country. The FCC has been using census block data to map the availability of broadband. This approach is flawed in that it overstates how many of our citizens already have access to broadband. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is planning to deploy a new mapping program over the next year to improve the mapping of existing broadband availability.

The conference exposed us to many other topics related to internet security and new technology. However, I couldn't help but flinch when we started talking about faster speeds and new technology. Too many of the people I represent do not have current technology. While the new technology is exciting, I am concerned about the gap widening with every day that my communities struggle for basic connections.

My bottom-line take-away from the conference is that we need to make sure that everyone eats once before anyone goes back for seconds. In other words, our rural communities need to be connected before we dedicate public funding to increasing existing speeds for those who already are served. I will continue to work for filling from the bottom-up.

The Rural Broadband Expansion Grant program application period is open through December 6, 2019. Visit <https://psc.wi.gov/Pages/Programs/BroadbandGrants.aspx> to learn more.

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.

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