

Further Increase Broadband Availability in Northwest Wisconsin

THE CITIZENS OF NORTHWEST WISCONSIN REQUEST

Public policy that encourages public-private partnerships that invest in broadband infrastructure in northwest Wisconsin.

BACKGROUND

Historically communities developed along important transportation corridors: waterways, stage coach routes, rail, roads, highways, and airports as a means of providing access to markets. Communities in Northwestern Wisconsin are closely examining the nearest “on-ramps” and speed limits to the Internet and are concerned about how we are positioned to compete in the global marketplace.

We believe that successful communities will be those that take an active role in bringing this essential infrastructure to their community for both businesses and residents. Successful communities understand that the demand for bandwidth and faster Internet connectivity will only increase over time. According to the International Economic Development Council’s 2012 survey on broadband:

- 74% of economic development professionals thought that fiber-based broadband would have a direct or indirect impact on their ability to attract businesses (60% also felt that wireless broadband would have a direct or indirect impact on their ability to attract businesses).
- 47% of economic developers indicate that money spent for broadband could produce a greater return by helping individuals improve job and professional skills.
- While the national broadband plan now defines a connection of 4 Mbps download/1 Mbps upload as being “broadband”, fewer than 10% of the economic development professionals believe 4 Mbps is sufficient for advancing their local economies.
- 66% of economic development professionals thought a minimum of 100 Mbps or greater was needed to effectively attract new businesses.

In a report titled, “Broadband for Rural America: Economic Impacts and Economic Opportunities” (October, 2012), the Hudson Institute concludes that “...our nation faces a ‘broadband gap,’ not only with regard to the lack of access in rural areas to service that meets the broadband threshold, but also with regard to the lack of availability of faster service between urban and rural America. The technology gap is not a fixed deficit that once filled, stays filled. The technology gap will be larger—much larger—in the future along with the information and technology gap, unless significant action is taken to overcome it.” In contrast to voice telephone services, which offer a service with largely the same capability to all subscribers, Internet connections in northwestern Wisconsin have come at a wide array of capabilities that most often do not provide the same opportunities found within the urban areas of Wisconsin.

The responsibility for providing broadband services to businesses and residents falls squarely on the shoulders of private sector providers. And yet, many businesses and residents in northwestern Wisconsin are not getting the broadband services they say they need. Increased demand can be met by providers and local communities working together, particularly in the more rural, less densely populated areas.

Ashland and Bayfield County Extension staff recently partnered with the corresponding economic development directors and the Broadband and E-Commerce Education Center to provide e-commerce training for small businesses in the northwest region. Positive feedback was received about the impact increased use of the web can have on their bottom line, which of course requires more than adequate broadband.

At the Wisconsin Innovation Network – Lake Superior Chapter annual Business & Technology Conference held August 3rd 2012 in Ashland a panel presentation titled “Using Technology to Create a Business or Work Remotely in Northwest Wisconsin” was part of the program. All of the presenters on the panel rely on broadband to operate their businesses. One of the panelists and Principal/Designer/ Photographer for a production company based in Washburn WI was limited in the location of his office/studio based on the band width available in the region. The graphic arts and photo files he creates, for his clients all over the country, require a reliable high speed connection. Speeds that were adequate in 2012 are coming up short in 2014. The bar is constantly being raised. Northwest Wisconsin is a desired, quality of life location for many entrepreneurs. Their choosing to locate in our region provides much needed employment and tax base for the region; however their final location is dictated not by where they want to live but where there is a high speed connection available.

Wisconsin needs public policy that encourages both public and private sector investments in the advancement of broadband. We need the same access to large capacity wired broadband in addition to the mobile broadband options that are available in urban areas of Wisconsin. The bottom line is that this is about economic impact and job growth.

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