

# Wisconsin Broadband Progress and Possibilities

## BACKGROUND

Over the past two years, extensive study of Wisconsin's broadband availability has been implemented and the results profiled by a statewide map (<http://wi.linkamericadata.org/>). These results paint a mixed picture for Wisconsin.

On the plus side, a basic broadband service is advertised as available for most locations throughout the State. However, many individual consumers, especially in rural areas, report that broadband service is either not available or not affordable at their home or business. Others may have access to a basic level of broadband, but indicate they need a higher capacity service to enable them to successfully operate a business; work from home; manage a farm enterprise; remotely access health services; protect the safety of citizens and so forth. The level of current access for Wisconsin's critical facilities (industrial parks, medical institutions, etc.) is mixed.

Many businesses, including traditional manufacturing and new technology sectors, cannot compete without the ability to rapidly process and manage data and communications. The ability to leverage web-based teaching and learning resources is essential for educators and students at all levels and increasingly at home and in other locations beyond traditional classrooms in order to adequately prepare the state's workforce and promote individual opportunity. New federal requirements mandate that the state's hospitals and clinics must be capable of receiving and transmitting large amounts of health care data or risk a loss of reimbursement for Medicare and Medicaid payments. A fully integrated mobile and high-speed fixed-wire communication network is needed to implement timely disaster alerts and effectively respond to individual emergencies.

In short, broadband communications is among the most important infrastructure components of our time. Some rural communities, such as Three Lakes in Oneida County (<http://www.townofthreelakes.com/broadband-availability>), have proactively brought leaders together to make broadband availability an economic and quality of life centerpiece. The City of Milwaukee has received a significant federal grant (<http://www2.ntia.doc.gov/grantee/city-of-milwaukee>) to promote broadband access for all citizens. These are just two of many examples of the importance communities place on broadband.

The authority of the State of Wisconsin to directly compel or incent broadband investment is limited. However, a partnership of State and local government, the broadband provider industry, the non-profit sector, large and small business and other stakeholders can collaborate to bridge the gaps in broadband availability, adequacy, and adoption in order to meet the economic development, health care, education, public safety and other needs of the state. Under the auspices of the Wisconsin Public Service Commission, a state

broadband investment plan will be developed that incorporates several key strategies to be advanced through public and private sector collaboration at the local, regional and state levels.

To move forward in developing this plan, in March of 2012, the Public Service Commission formed a Statewide Broadband Investment Plan Steering Committee with public sector and private sector representatives from nine Regional Planning Teams. The Steering Committee identified two top priorities: 1) The need to incent additional broadband investment to fill gaps where no service is available, and 2) the need to expand current broadband service where it is not adequate to meet local needs. Three specific tactics were identified to meet these top priorities

- Reduce barriers to broadband investment and expansion
- Leverage existing Federal and State dollars
- Support local-based initiatives

**Reduce Barriers to Broadband Investment.** Especially for more rural areas of Wisconsin, the high cost of broadband deployment coupled with low expected revenues, is a significant barrier to expanded broadband investment. The rates, terms and conditions for access to “rights-of-way” (for example: pole attachments, tower sites, and conduits, or simply the cost of burying cable when customers are widely scattered) can significantly impact the cost of broadband deployment. Consequently, cooperation to reduce the time and money required to access rights-of-way will address a current major barrier to deployment and provide more incentive to deploy needed infrastructure. Specific tactics include such things as rules or incentives that promote notification and sharing of facilities and open trenches; proactive communication between providers and permitting authorities to work out practical solutions that reduce time and money required to gain permits and engage in other streamlining actions.

**Leverage Federal and State Dollars.** Even in times of fiscal austerity, federal and state programs continue to be available to subsidize broadband deployment in unserved areas, promote digital literacy, or expand the adoption of broadband for purposes such as telehealth, public safety, public education and business innovation. The cooperative engagement of public sector and private sector leadership can be an important step forward to prepare Wisconsin to take the fullest advantage of federal dollars as well as effectively purposing existing state program dollars to accomplish the State’s broadband goals and objectives.

**Support Local-Based Initiatives** – Many state-level and regional initiatives to advance broadband must be executed at a local level. Local leaders require assistance in their efforts to increase education and awareness, document demand, and leverage assets. Local execution of actions to advance broadband availability, adoption and application can be enhanced through information sharing, targeted matching funds for key personnel and other resources. Top-down support for local leadership could include information on best practices, encouraging regional collaboration, identify matching funds to help support paid positions to advocate and coordinate collaborative initiatives; or encourage public access, training and awareness at libraries and other locations.