



## **An investment in broadband is an investment in our future**

*By Rebecca Cameron Valcq, Chairperson of the Public Service Commission of Wisconsin  
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At the Public Service Commission (PSC), we understand how important broadband access is to our communities' educational and economic opportunities. The COVID-19 pandemic has added urgency to expanding this critical service across the state so we can decrease the digital divide impacting many of our low-income and rural communities.

Broadband access has become an essential service that too many of our neighbors still need. According to the FCC's 2020 Broadband Deployment Report, 7.1% of Wisconsin residents lack access to at least one fixed, wired broadband service with a speed of 25 megabits per second or better, compared to the national average of 5.6%. These numbers are even more challenging in our state's rural areas, where 22.7% of residents lack access to these services.

Small business owners need to have a robust online presence; farmers need connectivity to utilize precision agricultural practices and to compete in a global economy; students of all ages need the ability to access virtual learning; and families should have the option to access telehealth services rather than have to travel long distances for routine medical appointments.

Since Governor Evers took office, the PSC has awarded over \$52 million in grants to fund the expansion of high-speed broadband internet. That's almost three times more than what was funded in the previous six years combined. While we have made a lot of progress, more funding is necessary to ensure reliable and affordable internet is accessible no matter your zip code.

Governor Evers' proposed 2021-2023 biennial budget allocates \$200 million for Broadband Access initiatives such as more funding for broadband expansion grants, and the creation of a line extension grant program designed to partially offset line extension costs to make existing infrastructure accessible to more households. The Governor's budget expands the Broadband Connectors pilot program to help local communities enter into partnerships with providers, and includes consumer protections that require providers to meet certain service requirements, including prohibiting denying service to residential customers on the basis of race or income. Passing a budget with these provisions is critical to connecting the hardest to reach parts of our state.

We know that expanding access to broadband internet is difficult in Wisconsin because many areas do not have the population density to support a return on investment for internet service providers. We have a vision to connect all in our state, and we need the state legislature's support to continue this important work. As we wait to learn how the \$3.2 billion in federal aid for COVID-19 relief

will be distributed across the state, I ask you to call your state legislators (1-800-362-9472) and ask them to support the Governor's broadband provisions in the state budget. These initiatives will move our state forward by breaking down barriers to broadband access in our state. By diminishing the digital divide, it will allow all in our state to realize the benefits of broadband and enable Wisconsin to reach its full potential.

*The views expressed in this article are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the PSC or any other individual Commissioner.*

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