

## **Expanded Broadband Creates Opportunity in Wisconsin**

Last month Wisconsin received nearly \$30 million in federal grants to build more than 600 miles of fiber optic cable, extending advanced broadband to Platteville, Wausau, Superior and the Chippewa Valley region. These funds expand connections for public institutions including universities, technical colleges, schools, hospitals and public agencies. An additional \$2.4 million will fund public access computer centers along with education and outreach within the four communities and the Menomonee Nation.

Wisconsin needs this expanded broadband to advance and remain competitive economically in a global environment. Though this project focuses on connecting public institutions, it will have a long-term impact on job creation and business development.

This project will dramatically expand broadband connectivity from 768 kilobytes per second, which is the federal definition of broadband, to between one and 10 gigabytes per second. The expanded connectivity meets the current and future needs of universities, hospitals and other public institutions which require much greater capacity and speed of connectivity.

Expanded broadband also enables significant cost savings, particularly in healthcare. For example a hospital that requires a costly med flight to deliver medical images or records to a remote location, will now have the ability to quickly deliver that image digitally. Hospitals can also provide telemedicine through Skype for initial consultations with patients and can consolidate medical records into a central database.

As more and more employers advertise job openings exclusively online, those without access to broadband are at a great disadvantage. Likewise employers are missing opportunities to reach a potential workforce. This expanded broadband capability benefits both unemployed individuals and businesses.

The ability to telecommute opens opportunities to employers and employees alike. In the northern and central parts of the state where job commutes are long, telecommuting enables employers to draw from a larger workforce and employees to eliminate commute costs and have increased flexibility in terms of where they choose to reside. Ultimately it could even attract people to live and work in Wisconsin.

Expanded broadband also means additional educational opportunities, whether through distance learning, online degree offerings or the ability for rural school districts to expand their curriculum to better prepare students for entry into the university or technical college system.

### **Economics of Broadband**

The federal funds that make this project possible are American Recovery and Reinvestment Act stimulus funds intended to create employment. The actual fiber optic cable installation is a \$42.7 million dollar project, which received nearly \$30 million in federal funds. This alone is estimated by the Council of Economic Advisors to create nearly 500 one-year jobs. The second component of this project, the Sustainable Broadband Adoption initiative, is a \$3.2 million project of which \$2.4 is funded through

grant dollars. This is our education and marketing effort which involves educating communities to use the expanded capacity to improve local economies and quality of life.

Public institutions in these communities are already economic engines that create jobs. Wisconsin's universities, technical colleges and hospitals are major employers that generate significant economic activity. This project will have tremendous impact within these organizations that also serve area businesses.

The Wisconsin Entrepreneurs' Network, a program within the Division of Entrepreneurship and Economic Development, is partnering with UW-Extension to develop resources that will drive people to use the broadband and understand its importance within their communities. One example is a virtual Investors and Entrepreneurs (I&E) club, that will supplement the already successful community-based I&E clubs and enable access to a greater number of entrepreneurs throughout the state.

As we work to develop additional resources, I am particularly excited to see how Wisconsin businesses and entrepreneurs find innovative and creative ways to utilize these ultra high-speed broadband lines.

The five areas involved in this project each have unique characteristics and serve a unique population. An evaluation of the results of implementing this initiative in these areas will provide a better understanding as we roll this out to communities across the state.

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