

## Big Steps Forward for Broadband Expansion

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***Sen Smith writes about Governor Evers' visit to the Town of Cross in Buffalo County last week and the efforts his administration has taken to expand broadband in Wisconsin.***

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Town of Cross, WI - I enjoy being out and about in the community and listening to the issues that are on folks' minds. No matter what corner of the district I'm in, one of the top issues I hear over and over again is broadband access.

We've long known the importance of broadband expansion, but the COVID-19 pandemic certainly stressed the urgency of connecting all homes and businesses to reliable, high-speed internet.

This was the main topic of conversation during a community meeting held last week in the Town of Cross near Fountain City. Governor Tony Evers came to this meeting to hear firsthand from residents the importance of expanding broadband, specifically in Wisconsin's rural areas.

The location of this meeting wasn't chosen at random. Governor Evers' Administration recently awarded the Town of Cross \$2.1 million through the Broadband Expansion Grant Program. This grant award will help to connect nearly 230 addresses in the Town of Cross by the fall.



Thanks to the hard work of local residents and broadband stakeholders and Governor Evers' efforts, a town of less than 400 people will now have faster access to internet services. We had a lot to talk about and celebrate during last week's meeting with Governor Evers, local officials and residents.

Communities in every region of the state have benefited from the historic investments delivered by Governor Evers since he took office in 2019. More than 387,000 homes and businesses now have new or improved access to these services because of state and federal funds allocated by the governor.

Governor Evers is a leader on this issue and has been for years, prioritizing broadband expansion efforts in new ways. In addition to the \$300 million investment the governor made toward improving broadband access, he's brought experts, stakeholders and community leaders together to consider new approaches in closing Wisconsin's digital divide.

In 2020, the governor created the Task Force on Broadband Access and followed this up by declaring 2021 the Year of Broadband Access. These announcements set the stage for productive conversations and deliverable results.

After the work accomplished by the Task Force in 2021, they released a report focusing on key areas to reach the shared mission of improving broadband accessibility, affordability and adaptability in Wisconsin.

Last week, there was more exciting broadband news: the Governor's Task Force on Broadband Access released their [second annual report](#), providing an update on the Administration's most recent progress.

Building off last year's work, the Task Force focused more specifically on "the structural network advancements necessary for local and regional planning work to be conducted, as well as a tool kit or resources that would benefit the work," according to the 2022 report. The Task Force plans to meet these objectives through active network building, community alignment and available resources, including support from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Deal.

The 2022 annual report included great examples of how the Task Force saw these objectives already met in communities within Wisconsin, including in Buffalo County's Town of Cross. They included the Town of Cross as a case study to demonstrate the extraordinary potential of strong public-private partnerships, like the one established between the town and the local internet service provider, Cochrane Cooperative Telephone Company.



The case study detailed the process, which in the end, proved successful for the Town of Cross and its residents. Before the Town of Cross even applied for the grant through the American Rescue Plan Act Broadband Access grant cycle in July 2021, they surveyed residents to assess the needs for improved broadband access and received a 70% response rate.

With this level of support, they applied for grant funding and received \$2.1 million, which will help to construct a 51 mile fiber network across 37.7 square mile area.

This story goes to show all that can be done with strong partnerships, key investments and dependable leaders. I am proud to represent the Town of Cross and the many other

communities in the district who have developed innovative approaches to improve broadband access.

These are strong steps forward, but I can tell it's only the beginning.

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