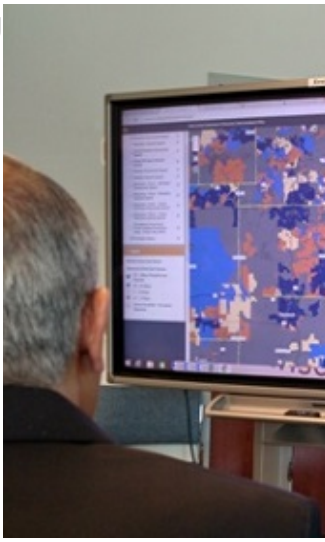
http://newiprogressive.com/images/stories/S5/broadband-map-northwoods-s5.jpg



Keeping connected during this public health crisis has again highlighted the lack of reliable internet in rural Wisconsin and the urgent need to expand broadband and better connect our communities.

EAU CLAIRE, WI - Think about it – thanks to technology it's possible to do so much from the nearest Wi-Fi location during this global pandemic. Some people can work from home or have a video call with their loved ones, and children can get their lessons from their teacher. Folks feeling ill, or dealing with a health condition, can use telehealth to meet with a medical professionals. Many retail establishments are online, offering whatever we need, including groceries, clothing, and hardware. In this day and age, we can do all of this because we have the internet; but all this is only possible if you can access it.

It's true. Rural Wisconsin doesn't have the same access to high-speed internet as our urban communities. Many are unaware of the challenges we face in rural Wisconsin while we attempt to connect from our homes to businesses and our loved ones during this difficult time.

During the 20th century, electricity started as a luxury for some, but it became essential for people to work and take care of their families. Much like electricity in the last century, internet in the early 1990s was a luxury, but now, during this pandemic, internet access is crucial. While we practice social distancing and stay in our homes to prevent the spread of COVID-19 it's even

more important that we're connected digitally.

Last week, I participated in a webinar with other legislators around the Midwest and a meeting with the Public Service Commission to discuss the lack of reliable internet. Since schools are closed, many rural school teachers have had to become more creative to deliver their lessons. Oftentimes, teachers and their students don't have the bandwidth needed to connect to the virtual classroom, so they'll park outside a library or school for the day to learn. Additionally, rural communities can't rely on their internet to shop and buy household basics online, which is especially difficult during our current public health emergency.

Many people are becoming experts at using the latest meeting apps on their computers and seeing their co-workers and friends while conducting regular business. It's still not better than meeting in-person, but it works. However, there are still too many people who cannot rely on it. For instance, when the State Senate convened last month to vote on the COVID Response Bill, I needed to drive to the UW-Eau Claire campus to use their internet. Even our most technologically savvy professionals from the state couldn't come up with a good solution for me to connect and participate from my home because my satellite internet provides too slow of speeds with too many interruptions.

For others, it can be about life and death. In my district, I've heard stories about people who couldn't get through when trying to call 911 or the EMTs couldn't find a location in time to save someone. There are some things that cannot be fixed like isolated locations that are a long distance from a hospital, but then there are communication and electronic access issues that can save lives.

Broadband expansion is slow, too slow considering the pace our world operates nowadays. Hard work, creativity and funding are needed to accomplish our biggest modern-day infrastructural challenge. Simple solutions like my dig-once bill could save millions of dollars and plan our internet infrastructure more efficiently. Or my other bill to add $100 million to broadband expansion grants and improve our mapping capabilities can provide the roadmap we need to connect Wisconsin quicker.

Above all, just like the challenges of electrification, we need to think about how Wisconsin can

connect the homes that will never be considered “profitable,” or the places too hard to go. Those must be our target so everyone in between gets hooked up and the internet becomes as trustworthy and necessary as the electricity that flows through our homes.

This pandemic has demonstrated how important and valuable that access is in today’s world. Nobody should be at risk just because they can’t visit their doctor or shop for groceries. We are social creatures. Family connections and friendships can be so important to our well-being. Let’s work for better connectedness during this crisis.