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

Sen. Vinehout is introducing bills, with Rep. Don Vurwink, focused on moving broadband expansion forward in Wisconsin. The bills would provide $100 million annually for broadband expansion and direct funds to areas of most need and provide accountability.

MADISON, WI - In a recent committee hearing, I argued majority lawmakers were moving broadband expansion forward by press release and little else.

This week Representative Don Vuwink (D-Milton) and I are circulating bills to actually move broadband forward for Wisconsin.

The Senate Revenue, Financial Institutions and Rural Issues committee debated a bill that would allow a local community to pass a resolution saying the community was “Telecommuting Ready.” However, nothing in that bill helped communities gain access to broadband.

In sweeping language, a representative of the telecommunications industry described how this bill, which did not provide a dime to communities for broadband expansion, was “Chapter Three” in the push to help expand broadband. The addition of Chapter 3 to the previous chapters does not make this book a best seller.

Recently the Governor bragged to farmers that the state “invested $41.5 million in expanding

broadband access." This statement is misleading.

"Chapter One" of the Governor's plan was to turn away $23 million in federal stimulus money for broadband expansion in 2011. The Public Service Commission only awarded $3.9 million between 2014 and 2017. On the other hand, Minnesota spent $85 million on broadband expansion in the same time-period.

In "Chapter Two", the Governor's budget allocates only $11 million toward broadband expansion that rural residents might see. Some money was spent in Fiscal Year 2016-17 and some was carried over for the next few years.

Most of the money for which the Governor is taking credit are funds earmarked for schools, juvenile corrections facilities, private and technical colleges, and state-run institutions. The school program, in some form, has been around for many years and uses a mix of federal and state money.

In the bills Representative Vuwink and I are introducing, we worked hard to solve problems with the current grant program to make sure Wisconsin residents are getting the Real Deal when it comes to broadband expansion.

First, our plan appropriates $100 million annually for the next two years. The plan is fully funded using a portion of the Manufacturing and Agriculture Tax Credit.

Second, our plan – "Moving Broadband Forward" – would assure customers actually receive real broadband speed. Under the current program, companies can obtain taxpayer funds for delivering "snail-slow" speeds of 5 Mbps (Megabits per second) download and .6 Mbps upload.

Our bill would require companies using state money to actually deliver speeds of at least the current federal minimum for broadband - 25 Mbps download and 3 Mbps upload. Further, our

bills would create “Truth in Advertising” standards that require companies to deliver the speed they promised to customers.

Our plan actually directs money to areas of most need. The Governor’s plan makes almost every Wisconsin county eligible for broadband grants. Under our “Moving Broadband Forward”, 85% of funds would be sent to counties with a population of less than 65,000 and areas with no broadband internet are prioritized.

Accountability in the use of public funds is sorely missing from the current program. Companies receiving funds are not required to provide broadband in areas they promised to serve; companies are not required to repay state money if they do not deliver what they promised; companies can receive multiple grants at one time, increasing the chance of being paid twice for the same project.

All these problems are eliminated with the accountability provisions in our plan. Additionally, accountability is assured by authorizing the nonpartisan Legislative Audit Bureau to evaluate the new program.

Finally, municipalities – counties, towns or cities – that want to seek state funds for broadband build-out are eligible under the new plan. This means citizens themselves, working through their local government, are empowered to create broadband expansion opportunities.

Broadband is the Twenty-First Century equivalent of electricity. Everyone should have access to the Internet. One day, many of you may travel to or contact someone living in a rural area. All of us will eat something grown by farmers who rely on the Internet for many important aspects of production. Many folks long to live in a rural area but need broadband for telecommuting.

Wisconsin deserves better than broadband expansion by press release. Moving Broadband Forward is the Real Deal for Wisconsin. Please encourage your lawmakers to sign on as cosponsors of these new proposals.