

We Need to Better Connect

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Sen. Jeff Smith provides an update on what's been happening with broadband expansion efforts during the state budget process.

EAU CLAIRE, WI - While the weather has warmed up, I've been able to hold more Stop N' Talks and meet people throughout the district. During these visits, the question I'm asked most often is "Can't you just get along?"

At the beginning of this legislative session, I was looking forward to finally getting back to work after a year the legislature seldom met. When this session began, I had high hopes that we had at least one important issue that every legislator seemed to agree on and that we might actually accomplish: broadband expansion.

This past year really illustrated how important it is for every household to be connected. It was encouraging to hear my colleagues on both sides of the aisle talk about the undeniable need to invest in and improve broadband access.

Governor Tony Evers heard Wisconsin's calls loud and clear by declaring 2021 the Year of Broadband Access. Governor Evers proposed a historic \$200 million investment in his 2021-2023 biennial budget and added an additional \$100 million in federal funding from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) for broadband expansion.

Governor Evers delivered on his commitment to make 2021 the Year of Broadband Access. The application window for [broadband expansion grants](#) is currently open for communities and their partners to apply.

Meanwhile, the Republican Majority countered the Governor with a half-baked, deeply-flawed plan earlier this spring before the U.S. Treasury Department issued its guidance on how to use the ARPA money. Despite the problems with their proposal, the silver lining is that Republicans are finally willing to follow the Governor's lead on broadband expansion.

Just last week, Republicans on the Joint Finance Committee (JFC) – the legislative budget-writing committee – voted to borrow \$125 million to expand broadband. Earlier this year, the Wisconsin State Journal reported that expanding broadband statewide would cost roughly \$1.4 billion.



I'm not an accountant, but I know a bad deal when I see one. We could spend \$1.4 billion to fully expand broadband in Wisconsin utilizing the \$4.4 billion in new revenue we have today. But JFC Republicans decided to borrow, which will cost us \$35 million in interest over the course of 20 years according to the nonpartisan Legislative Fiscal Bureau.

To summarize, Republicans want to borrow and pay interest to address what may be the most pressing issue facing Wisconsin's, even though we have the funding immediately available.

So, why borrow? Well, this goes back to funding our public schools. Yes, it's related. You see, the JFC slashed Governor Evers' K-12 budget by 90%, thinking they could recoup that loss with federal ARPA funds. Unfortunately, this cut to our schools prevented Wisconsin from meeting a federal standard on state education spending to be eligible for \$2.3 billion in

additional funding. Republicans couldn't invest any more state dollars – like \$200 million for broadband access – without having to spend more in our classrooms. So, instead of investing our windfall of revenue into broadband expansion and putting a few more dollars in schools, Republicans chose to create more debt. This goes to show the lengths Republicans are willing to go to avoid properly funding our schools. It's pretty hard to reconcile that and get along.

There was a time when opposing ideas could be worked out for the best outcomes. There was a time when elected officials were more responsive to your real needs rather than their own ideology. After such a difficult year, I, like many, hoped for a chance to work together, but it just isn't panning out that way.

Internet isn't the only thing we're lacking connection on. Elected officials have become so disconnected from the communities they represent – communities who want better schools, better broadband and a better state for future generations. I still believe collaboration is possible, but it'll take elected officials willing to listen and lead, putting your priorities over party interest.

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