

TO: County Board Members on the Broadband Task Force

FROM: Carrie Springer

RE: Broadband update with funding options from the state and federal government

There have been a number of updates in the broadband issue since my last memo and a lot of new funding allocated by Congress to expand access to broadband. Below you will find a quick issue update and a summary of available funding to expand broadband.

First, **Congress finally provided funding through the CARES Act for the FCC to update their broadband maps** as required under the Broadband DATA Act. This will be very helpful once it is done for counties like Dane because updated maps will show the real access gaps that exist in our county. As you may recall, this act requires the FCC to gather more detailed information on what internet options are truly available and allows state and local governments to challenge maps if they collect their own data. It also allows the public to collect data to help update the map.

There are numerous ways to help increase the amount of local data for the maps including the “TestIT” app, which can be found through the NACO website at www.naco.org/TestIT or at the Apple App Store or Google Play. MadRep has also been helping advertise a way to test your speed and it can be found [here](#). Additionally, Iowa County had their UW-Extension office send out a survey to collect local internet speed information – see attachment two to my email. This survey method is similar to how the town of Vermont in Dane County collected information to help their application to the state broadband grant program get funded.

Second, **two companies were recently award RDOF funds to expand broadband in a number of areas in Dane County** – see attachment three to my email for the map of the areas with expansion projects being funded. The two companies are Charter and LTD, a Minnesota based company that focuses on expansion with towers in rural areas. Charter received \$168 million for Wisconsin in RDOF funds and plans on putting in \$500 million of their own funds to build access for 143,000 businesses and residents in Wisconsin.

Third, the **governor’s broadband task force released their report** on June 30th. The goal of the task force is to get every Wisconsin resident broadband access by 2025. You can find the report [here](#). The top recommendations are increasing funding for the state broadband expansion program, collecting more internet access data from households, increasing consumer protections and pricing transparency, establishing a state internet assistance program and a digital equity fund, and increasing coordination to maximize funding options.

Fourth, **NACO’s broadband task force released their report** just this month. You can find that [here](#). The top recommendations are requiring a minimum standard for broadband, implementing “dig once” policies to make sure all infrastructure

projects incorporate broadband expansion, coordinating expansion using a variety of technologies, encouraging local communities to coordinate with internet providers, permanently funding affordability initiatives, and removing bans on municipal broadband.

Finally, **Congress and the state have allocated a lot more funding** to tackle the broadband access problem and Dane County is already seeing added expansion projects headed our way. A summary of that funding is below and for most programs the best access the funding continues to be working with internet providers to apply for funds.

Federal programs funding broadband expansion and access

The federal government has 30 programs at seven different agencies supporting broadband access and expansion. The bills passed over the last year or so in response to the pandemic have increased funding to these programs to accelerate building out the broadband networks across the country. Some of these programs will not help Dane County directly as they are targeted toward specific areas like telehealth and the funding goes to health care providers or they are for areas with very small populations that are unlikely to currently be served by providers at all. However, there are a number of programs that can and are going to bring funding to Dane County to expand broadband.

Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Programs

- The **Connect America Fund (CAF)** established two programs – the **Rural Digital Opportunity Fund (RDOF)** and the **5G Fund for Rural America**. The 5G program is for areas unlikely to see 5G come into the area and since Dane County is already seeing providers start to bring that here, only the RDOF fund will likely bring funds to Dane County.
- The FCC is allocating \$20.4 billion in **RDOF funding** in two phases. The winners of the first phase were announced in December 2020 and Dane County is going to benefit from the first round. You can see the map of the 180 bid winners that will get a total of \$9.2 billion to bring high-speed internet to over 5.2 million homes and businesses [here](#). You will need to zoom in to find the WI winners and then zoom in even more to see Dane County. Or see attachment three for the Dane County area map. The next phase of RDOF funds will be awarded after the FCC updates the maps so this should help fill in the gaps in Dane County even more if an effort is made to help get localized data submitted to the FCC. A date for the second phase has not been set yet by the FCC.
- Small, rural internet providers will receive Alternative Connect America Cost Model (ACAM) funding over the next several years in two phases from the FCC. This program is funded using the Universal

Service Fund and will bring about \$487 million to Wisconsin over several years bringing service to about 75,000 locations.

- The FCC also has a program called **Lifeline** to subsidize internet payments for some low-income households and the FCC is currently running the **Emergency Broadband Benefit** program that gives up to \$50 a month to household until the public health emergency is over or they run out of funding. The portal for households to get funding from that program opened on May 12th. They also run a number of programs to help expand telehealth in rural areas and support internet access in schools and libraries.

National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA)

- In December 2020 Congress passed the Consolidated Appropriations Act and it established three new broadband programs at NTIA, a division in the Commerce Department. Only one, the **Broadband Infrastructure Deployment Grant Program**, has the potential to bring expansion funding to Dane County. The \$288 million grant program opened up for applications on May 19th and closes on August 17th. The program is for state or local governments partnerships with internet providers to build capacity, especially in rural areas. More information can be found [here](#).

U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)

- The USDA has a program called Rural eConnectivity Program, or ReConnect. It provides loans and grants for construction and equipment in eligible rural areas with less than 20,000 people. Congress appropriated \$555 million in 2020 and \$635 million for 2021. They added \$100 million in CARES Act funding as well. Wisconsin has been allocated \$3.1 million in grants and \$10.2 million in loans to be distributed from 2020 to 2025.

Interest in broadband at the federal level is high and there are currently more than two dozen bills introduced in the House of Representatives from both parties dealing with broadband and over a dozen in the Senate. Congress is also currently debating an infrastructure bill that could allocate even more funding for broadband. The regular appropriations process in Congress is still going on as well, which could result in more funding for any of 30 federal programs dealing with broadband access and expansion.

State broadband expansion programs at the Public Service Commission (PSC)

Wisconsin funds broadband expansion through the PSC Broadband Expansion Grant program. Typically it is funded with only state funding, but this year Governor Evers also allocated \$100 million in funding from Wisconsin's allocation of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) dollars.

American Rescue Plan Act

- The applications for the **ARPA funding** are due next week and used a different set of eligibility criteria than the grants funded with state dollars. Not many areas in Dane County were eligible and many of the areas that were eligible were recently awarded RDOF funding. The areas in red on [this map](#) were eligible from this funding pot. A letter spelling out the criteria for this funding stream can be found [here](#).
- It is possible that the state could allocate more ARPA funds to broadband in the future as they have until 2024 to spend the more than \$2.5 billion in funds coming to the state and Wisconsin's ARPA funds were split into two payments so the other half is scheduled for next year.

CARES Act

- In September of 2020 the state also awarded \$5.3 million to 12 projects using CARES Act funds. These were mainly projects that had already applied for the state program, were ready to go, and had not won funding in the last round. There were no Dane County projects in this funding award.

Broadband Expansion Grant Program

- The state Broadband Expansion Grant Program is the main way our state funds increased access to high-speed internet. Since 2014 there has been at least one round of grant funding each year and some years there are more than one round of funding made available. Typically funding doesn't allow for every application to get an award and the PSC estimates that it will cost somewhere between \$700 million to \$1.4 billion to bring 25Mbps download/3Mbps upload service to all Wisconsin residents. The program has funded 279 projects around the state, including numerous ones in Dane County.
- There were two projects funded in Dane County in the 2021 grants announced this May – Upnet WI applied for and was awarded two fiber to the premises grants. One is in the town of Bristol and it will bring fiber to 11 businesses and 210 homes and one in Cottage Grove bringing fiber to 5 businesses and 81 homes.
- The recently passed state budget included another \$125 million for future rounds of broadband grants after the current round that ends next week, which means more Dane County projects can apply in future rounds.