

Region 7E Legislative Round Table on Economic Development

December 17, 2020

7:00 pm

Zoom Meeting

Bob Voss – Executive Director of East Central Regional Development Commission introduced people and started the meeting. Said that he would address the 800 pound gorilla in the room that COVID has hit businesses hard and they have either closed their doors or changed their business models. This meeting includes township and legislative officials to have a discussion around economic development.

Attendees: State Senators- Mark Koran, Jason Rarick; State Representatives: Brian Johnson, Anne Neu

First to speak: Congressman Peter Staubert- 10,000 foot view of the package they are negotiating- COVID 2.0. It is not perfect, so they are going to try and push a 900 billion dollar bill through that will help business, childcare, vaccine distribution, and broadband. 2020 was a very difficult year, but with the vaccine we can see the light at the end of the tunnel. This will help open up our economy. Very frustrating that Menards and Walmart and big business can stay open but the mom and pop business are forced to close their doors. He is working to address this with the governor.

Recorded message from Amy Klobuchar – Thank you for all you've done during these difficult times. Now it's time to unite and move forward. There is a reason to be hopeful with the vaccines which have been proven to be 90% effective. How are we going to get these vaccines to the smaller towns? So they aren't left behind. We need regional delivery of this vaccine. Congress needs to pass another economic relief package, because we do not want to create more economic hardship. We need infrastructure for that day after tomorrow. There are many ways to access the keys to success, they are all available and there are jobs out there. She is working hard to get broadband to all. Certain rural areas have a disadvantage for children learning and that isn't fair.

Senator Tina Smith wasn't available, but Hannah Alstead of her staff gave an update. She is backing telehealth and broadband to help mental health in rural communities. She is backing a community connect program. Co-sponsored the digital equity act and will push for access to affordable and reliable broadband. In order for these communities to develop jobs, they need infrastructure. Economic development for rural America is on the top of the list for Senator Smith.

LOCAL PERSPECTIVE ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT section:

Nancy Hoffman- Executive director of Chisago county HRA-EDA. Gave a powerpoint on broadband in region 7E:

County	2022 Goal 25/3 Mbps	County Ranking	2026 Goal 100/20 Mbps	County Ranking
Chisago	84.34%	#44	71.92%	#53
Isanti	76.77%	#68	48.63%	#81
Kanabec	60.75%	#83	26.41%	#87
Mille Lacs	87.15%	#37	58.9%	#70
Pine	60.24%	#84	39.13%	#85

Region 7E Broadband Ranking

Ranking out of 87 Counties

Source: Blandin Foundation from 2020 annual survey of MN Providers (2019 data)

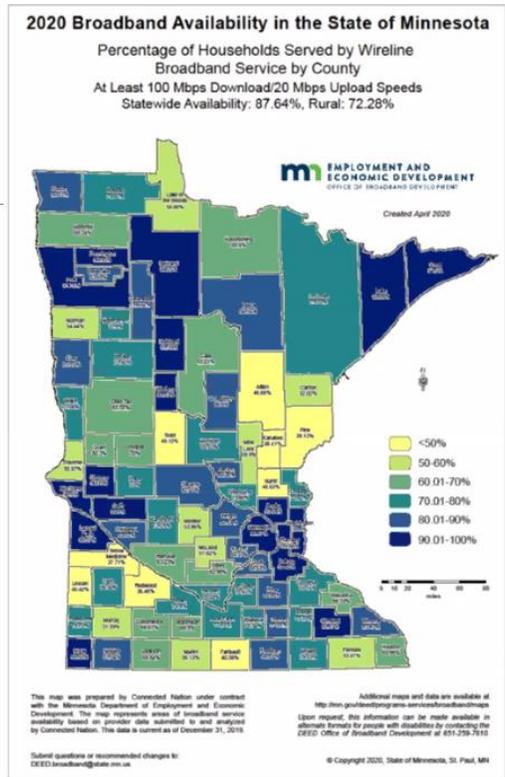
Barriers

Financial Capacity – Many of the Counties, Cities, Townships lack the financial capacity to provide public sector support for broadband. There is also high poverty in some areas.

Density – Being rural, much of the counties are very sparsely populated.

Terrain – The hills, forests, lakes and rivers make it more difficult to consider options for broadband.

Providers – Many of the providers are not willing to provide sufficient broadband.



Need for Broadband

What would you do if you had faster Internet?

- 35% Telecommute
- 45% Education
- 86% Quality of Life
- 31% Economic Development

Why do Chisago County Residents Want High Speed Internet?

In the spring of 2015 the Chisago County "Got Internet" survey was disbursed to Chisago County residents. When asked what they would likely do if they had high speed internet access, Chisago County residents responded:

TELECOMMUTE
35% said they would telecommute. Currently, 66% of the residents commute 30 miles or more to work.
Respondent remark: "I telecommute 3+ days a week and find that it's difficult or impossible to upload some information back to my company"

EDUCATION
45% said they would use high speed internet for student access. Students in K-12 are required to use on-line tools. Without high speed internet students cannot access their schoolwork. With high speed internet residents could take college classes while living in Chisago County.
Respondent remark: "It was a struggle to get high speed internet. Our kids have to use digital devices provided by the school with remote WiFi. Very frustrating"

QUALITY OF LIFE
86% said they would use it for web surfing and social networking. Also, 20.4% said they would access telehealth, 79.6% said get entertainment, and 36.5% gaming.
Respondent remark: "I'm in Rural State and run into such a mind-bag of service level as well as access. People have to make decisions to not stay at home they like due to the service level."

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
31% said they would operate a business. Higher speeds allow a business to innovate and grow. It is necessary to have high speed internet for business expansion in our community.
Respondent remark: "Service is very slow, often no other providers available, and we are trying to run a business which relies on the internet."

CHISAGO COUNTY
 HRA-EDA
 A Natural Resource for Business
 Chisago County HRA-EDA
 www.chisagoarea.org
 (855) 874-5884



COVID 19

Schools - ECMECC

- o East Central Minnesota Education Cable Cooperative – 14 school districts and Pine Tech

Digital Navigator

- o Hot spots do not work for every student
- o Some communities no option but to go to school in person
- o Broadband is the biggest challenge

Employees Telecommuters

- o Good for rural areas with broadband
- o Stories of people are moving
- o Office Center is full

CARES Funds for broadband technology

Need extended deadlines, and approval for CARES to be used for broadband

MN Border to Border Broadband Grants

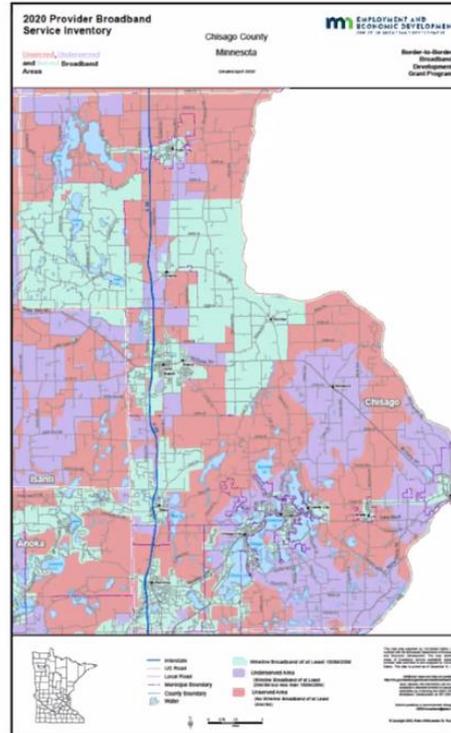
Three Border to Border Broadband Grants

1. Willing provider
2. Communities willing and able to contribute
Sunrise ½ of the Township – 2016
Fish Lake Township – 2018
Nessel – 2019
3. Border to Border Grant

2½ townships down 6 ½ to go

Townships that are ready

Need for more funding and ongoing funding



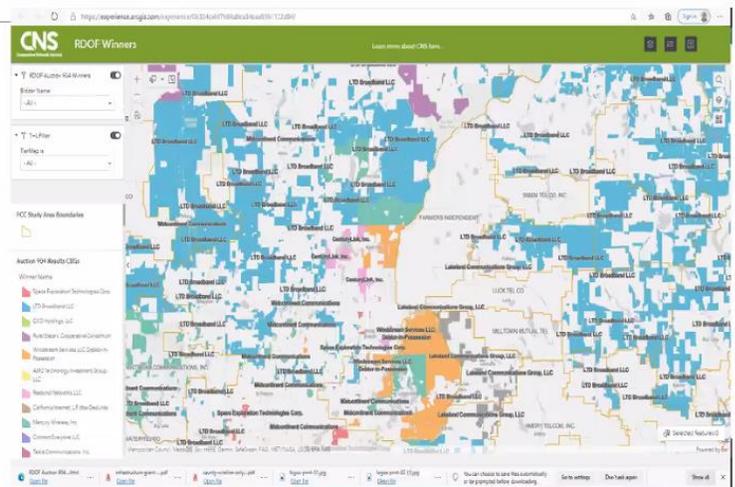
RDOF Concerns

Are these companies capable

- Can they provide sufficient service?
- Will we be waiting 10 years?
- Will they meet the match?

Does this interfere with local governments broadband plans.

This could be good if they get it done and will share their plans with the local governments.



Turning into the “have’s and have-nots”- Jim Swenson North Branch Mayor. We need to make sure funds are available to everyone so that we can keep our businesses open.

Stephanie Hillesheim- Princeton. Biggest goal was to reach 5,000 people with the census count and COVID was not our friend in helping to accomplish that task. Did receive 350,000 in cares funding and gave half of that back to the businesses and hospitals. DNR grant let them reinvigorate their park and put up a holiday light show in the campground. Has really kept the community hopeful.

State house and senate reps:

Senator Koran first: All reforms to expedite economic recovery. Want to manage block funds effectively in MN as opposed to federally controlled dollars.

Senator Rarick- broadband, high schools teaching manufacturing and trade careers that don't need a 4 year degree. Want to encourage that. Will focus on working with counties to help our businesses get needed relief funding. Will help counties make a plan to find out how is impacted the hardest and help them get grants so doors won't close.

Representative Brian Johnson and Rep Anne Neu:

Colleagues touched on many of the issues already, so not a lot to add. But do need to go into legislative session knowing that there will be a lot of triage of COVID issues and the budget. Priority is to get the economy back up. Business relief packet will be some work for the people on the call. County bucket of funds to give flexibility to give help to our businesses. Many businesses will get a check automatically, but at the county level you need to make sure it goes to who needs it.

Round table discussion