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Rural residents all across Minnesota and the United States are among the most hearty, innovated, independent, and self-sustaining citizens in the Country. Many live and work on farms and ranches. Many more work in businesses, schools, and hospitals in the small communities that are spread across rural America. In the digital age, these communities and their residents are at risk of losing their economic viability if they cannot be fully connected to the world through available broadband services.

Broadband access improves the lives of rural residents in many ways. Most might think of the shopping sites, but broadband access is beneficial for many reasons. Farmers and ranchers can use high speed internet to help manage their operations, secure inputs, research markets, etc. Small town businesses can market their product and services to a larger customer base outside of their own geographic area. A major impact of broadband in rural areas is the field of healthcare. Telemedicine and telehealth are exploding fields that are playing a vital role in make sure the rural residents have access to world-class cutting edge medical services in all fields of health care, and mental health in particular. Also, access to high speed internet can help rural areas compete for new business that would otherwise not be able to operate in these areas. Rural schools also benefit by being able to expand opportunities for students. One example in my school is foreign language classes that are taught through a tele-classroom with students from several area schools participating in a single class.

Providing broadband to rural areas can be challenging. Many broadband providers are hesitant to build networks in rural areas because of the low population rates. These services are expensive to build and provide, particularly in rural areas that may have sparse populations and rugged terrain. Low population and subscription rates make it very hard for providers to be profitable. Rural areas also tend to have aging populations who are not as involved in the modern digital world and are less inclined to buy the service.

Just as happened with other major infrastructure projects in our nation's history, such as the railroad system, highway systems, electrical systems, and phone systems; governments must play a vital role. Federal, State, County and yes, even Township governments can put policies in place to help ensure access to broadband for all rural areas. They can partner with providers to help build systems. They can pass development friendly policies such as ordinances, and permitting processes that incent providers to build in rural areas. There have been, and should continue to be Federal grants, and non-profit foundation grants available to rural areas to expand and deliver broadband services because a connected nation will be a prosperous nation. Rural Americans stand ready to contribute to that prosperity.