

*Broadband Funding: The Key to Rural Development*

Broadband coverage in rural areas is the most important policy that must be adopted as it is essential for slowing the population shift to urban centers. At the peak of successful farming in rural Minnesota, the population was more evenly spread between urban and rural centers. As milk and crop prices continued to decline, family farms disappeared at an alarming rate. As a result, people moved closer to urban centers for employment. The dawn of the digital age paralleled this population shift. Many companies have taken advantage of this trend, and they have saved money by allowing employees to work from home. This is called telecommuting which has increased the level of flexibility as people can work from any setting. Some people enjoy city living; others would not dream of leaving the country. Telecommuting allows people to choose their ideal homes.

Today, over 40 percent of rural Americans do not have access to broadband at home. In urban America, only four percent of the people do not have access. In the rural areas, there is a staggering broadband accessibility problem. I live in the country. My grandparents operated a small dairy farm in the 1970's and 1980's. Today, their farm sits vacant. It remains unsold on the market for almost a year. The farms surrounding their property have also discontinued milking, except for one. This farm is barely making ends meet. The farmer's wife runs an embroidery business out of her home to earn extra income. Her business relies heavily on the internet, which is slow and unreliable. She feels helpless because the internet company she currently uses is the only one providing broadband in her rural area. If she had access to faster internet via fiber optic cabling, her business would be more successful, and the chances of survival of her family's farm would increase.

Rural revitalization and business growth must be a priority. If grassroots government is to continue, the people represented must be able to reside in rural areas and make a living. Rural vitality must be sustained. Working toward this goal, rural retailers can work with township government and benefit township residents because they expand and diversify the tax base. They are vital because they improve rural residents' quality of life, and they also attract new residents. Population growth in rural areas will result. The federal government has already spent billions of dollars trying to improve broadband access, but most of that funding has gone to large telecom companies. Those same businesses make more money when they target bigger population centers, so rural areas often get missed.

Minnesota has been working hard to address this issue. The MN Employment and Economic Office of Broadband Development has formed a governor-appointed task force to guide the State's broadband development efforts. Rural Minnesota residents must make their voices heard by contacting their state representatives to ensure that unserved rural communities and townships are prioritized in the passage of the Border-to-Border Grant Program.