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Gov. Evers, WEDC, PSC Announce Six Communities Selected for Broadband Connectors Pilot Program

MADISON — Gov. Tony Evers today, together with the state Public Service Commission (PSC) and the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC), announced six communities were selected for the new Broadband Connectors Pilot program cohort.

“As families, business owners, and communities across the state continue to face the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for affordable, accessible high-speed broadband is perhaps more important now than ever,” said Gov. Evers. “This joint program will provide critical support and resources to help local communities get connected.”

The joint pilot program will help provide technical assistance to help these communities apply for federal, state, and private-sector broadband expansion funds.

“Such a tremendous response demonstrates that there is a strong desire to apply for state and federal broadband funding, but the challenge for many communities is a lack of resources to participate,” said Rebecca Cameron Valcq, Chairperson of the PSC. “This pilot program shows promise to push through that barrier, allowing communities to take steps to connect their residents more quickly.”

The selected communities include:

- Lac du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians
- Ho-Chunk Nation
- School District of Owen-Withee
- Town of Cross
- St Croix County
- Fond du Lac County

“Throughout the listening sessions of the Governor’s Blue Ribbon Commission on Rural Prosperity this summer, residents came with one consistent message: they need broadband to stay connected for jobs, education, and healthcare,” said WEDC Secretary and CEO Missy Hughes. “This pilot program will provide us with important lessons on how we can better use existing resources to fill in the gaps in coverage and reach more communities.”

WEDC has identified broadband as one of the three key opportunities to help Wisconsin businesses recover from the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has illuminated significant gaps in broadband coverage in Wisconsin’s rural communities, making e-learning, telecommuting, telehealth and online sales difficult or impossible in many parts of the state. Navigating broadband expansion can be challenging, and local capacity is often stretched thin, especially now as communities grapple with the impacts of the COVID-19

pandemic. As a result, a flood of 96 applications were received from local governments from across the state requesting to participate in the pilot.

Applications to participate in the pilot were accepted September 21-30, 2020. Local governments, tribal governments, and school districts were eligible to apply. Pilot program participants were selected based on the following criteria: the community has taken some initial steps toward broadband expansion; diverse community partners have committed to working together on broadband expansion; the community has a clear vision for the technical assistance they are seeking; and the community seeks to expand broadband in an underserved or unserved area.

The pilot program is intended to help WEDC and PSC to better understand what communities' broadband technical assistance needs are. Drawing on the expertise of both WEDC and PSC staff, the best practices developed from the pilot program will be incorporated into a Wisconsin Broadband Playbook for communities.

Through participation in the pilot cohort, WEDC and PSC intent to increase communities' readiness to apply for state, federal, or private broadband opportunities, and provide them with a roadmap for continuing its work to expand broadband after the pilot ends.

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