

# Conference organizers: Rural high-speed Internet critical

**By Jim Massey**  
Editor

**BELMONT** — The federal government is spending billions of dollars to provide high-speed Internet technology to rural communities across the country, and officials in southwestern Wisconsin say they want to make sure they're part of the upgrade.

About 100 people attended an April 22 conference called "Connecting Southwest Wisconsin," which was designed to come up with strategies to provide broadband access for area residents. Conference organizers said high-speed Internet access is directly related to economic development, improvement of health care services, public safety and quality-of-life issues.

"It's going to be up to each of us to get our communities educated, motivated and connected," said Ricky Rolfsmeyer, Wisconsin Rural Partners executive director. Rolfsmeyer is a member of the committee that organized the broadband conference.

"In the long run we're going to need to pool our ideas, our knowledge and our expertise to help us all achieve a common goal of broadband throughout our area of the state," he said. "Today is about solutions."

The event featured speakers who talked about federal stimulus money available to

expand the availability of rural broadband and offered success stories about where it's already being done.

Andy Lewis, a UW-Extension community development specialist, said a lack of infrastructure can have a big effect on whether local communities grow and prosper.

"If you don't have broadband access you will be excluded from a lot of opportunities," Lewis said. Young people are less likely to take up residence in communities that don't have modern technology available, he said.

Wisconsin and other states won't get to 100 percent broadband use simply by building the infrastructure, because some people have decided they don't want or need to use the technology, he said. Education also

will be another important component as broadband coverage is expanded.

Wisconsin was one of the first states to map out where broadband access is available and where it's not, Lewis said.

"Can you imagine the Department of Transportation doing a study without knowing where the roads are?" Lewis said. "This is what it feels like to me. It's frustrating to think that billions are being spent on broadband without having that information up front."

Wisconsin is falling behind neighboring states in the number of high-speed Internet lines, Lewis said, and the steady increase in Internet use has slowed in the past two years during the economic recession.

About 57 percent of U.S. farmers are using the Internet, Lewis said, but in Wisconsin, only 29.2 percent had high-speed access in 2007.

Ross Wilson, director of educational technology services at Cooperative Edu-

cational Services Agency 10 in Chippewa Falls, said the Chippewa Valley InterNetworking Consortium, known as CINC, has successfully helped link schools, libraries, health care providers and local governments to a high-speed fiber-optic network. The regional initiative has helped bridge the "digital divide" between a small metropolitan area and rural communities.

"All we did was bury fiber together to connect appliances," Wilson said. "We're letting the appliances do the work. It's all collaboration, and it's all people. It's a group process that happened over time with a clear objective."

Wilson said there's no hierarchy among the 18 organizations involved in the CINC project. All participants signed simple agreements to say they would help fund cooperative projects.

Lewis said southwestern Wisconsin schools, governments and businesses need

to follow the Chippewa Valley example.

Bill Gillis, an official with Link America Alliance, is working on a mapping project to determine where high-speed Internet service is available in Wisconsin. The Wisconsin Public Service Commission contracted with Link America to conduct the study.

Preliminary data should be available by the end of May, Gillis said.

A recent study estimated it's costing the United States about \$54 billion per year to not have all governments, health care providers, schools and businesses connected to high-speed Internet, Gillis said. The cost of making broadband available nationwide is estimated at about \$24 billion.

"I think it's just good government, good fiscal man-

agement to get everybody connected," he said.

Gary Evenson, administrator of the Wisconsin Public Service Commission's Telecommunications Division, said about 80 percent of Americans have access to high-speed Internet services. He said that's not enough.

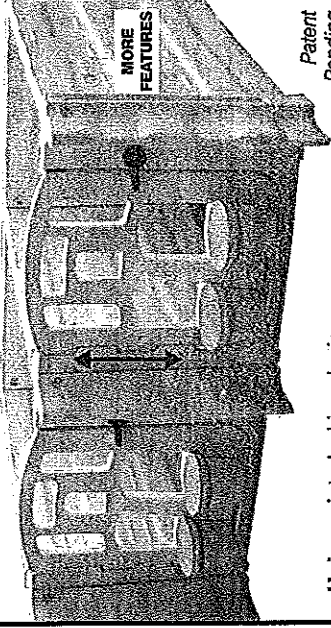
"Eighty percent isn't 100 percent," he said. Studies have determined that about 40 percent of the people who don't have broadband access say they don't need it.

"You can lead a horse to water but when you get it to float on its back you've really got something." Evenson said. "We need to help the final 40 percent understand why they need it."

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