

# Broadband

Broadband is the general term for a number of technologies that offer high-speed Internet access to business and residential customers. With high-speed Internet, users can browse the “web”; exchange e-mail that includes documents, photos, and visuals; and participate in Internet communications like Zoom conferences. Without high-speed service, users are limited to brief text messages via e-mail.

Currently, several private businesses, some of national reach, offer Broadband service to urban customers. Unfortunately, those businesses have been reluctant to extend service to rural customers because the up-front cost to connect those customers could be large against an expected limited short-term return. Just with rural electrification in the 1930’s, government assistance seems necessary for sharing the costs in extending service.

The Minnesota legislature has passed limited funding for Broadband assistance, currently \$70 million from a state budget of \$48 billion; Representative Ecklund was the Minnesota House sponsor and Senator Simonson a Senate sponsor. The Minnesota governor’s office has a task force on Broadband development from that funding. The latter organization meets quarterly, sets state Broadband objectives on service availability, and produces yearly reports on Broadband availability. As one might expect, Broadband service in urban communities meets or exceeds objectives while rural communities and spaces lag behind. Still, the task force report for 2018 shows that rural Minnesota would mostly meet objectives by 2020 for basic high-speed service. Of course, technology has moved on with yet higher level service like optical fiber connection now offered in urban but not rural environments. The task force’s newest objectives take these development in mind by setting new rural objectives for 2025.

The federal government is also involved in Broadband development with two bills, Access to Broadband Act and the Rural Broadband Acceleration Act, moving through or passed by the US House. The Senate, as one might expect, hasn’t acted. The House bills recognize that the US trails most developed nations in rolling out high-speed Broadband Internet service, that high-speed Broadband is a crucial component for economic competitiveness, and that the rural economy will lag further behind without it.

But with the national and state government budgets now deeply in debt from Covid-19, it’s unclear how much financial support rural Broadband can get in 2021. The DFL Senior Caucus has been active in lobbying the Minnesota legislature for Broadband support since the mid decade. We intend to continue that lobbying; support through letters and testimonials from our rural members would be most helpful in convincing legislators. And we hope to gain a seat at on the governor’s task force (we will at least follow up on its actions). Of course, just like at the federal level, we expect the Senate to be the likely hard spot.