

Evers hears Oneida County broadband struggles as PSC approves major infrastructure project

By Katie Thoresen | WXPB | July 13, 2022



Oneida County will invest more than 15 million local, state, and federal dollars to improve broadband. The state Public Service Commission approved and awarded grants for a project that will build a 223-mile fiber ring in the county. It will provide high-speed internet to more than 300 businesses and nearly 6,000 homes.

It's a project that's severely needed in the area, as Governor Evers found out during his visit to Rhinelander Tuesday.

Inside a nearly full Rhinelander city council meeting room, Evers heard from person after person about the struggles with getting an internet connection in Oneida County.

Jenny Gibson, who owns Black Cliffs resort in Minocqua, shared how unreliable her broadband is.

"How do you run a 13-cabin resort with people coming up from Chicago that expect to have the service that they have? I'm just trying to keep my own business going," Gibson said.

Kris Adams Wendt with the Wisconsin Valley Library Service talked about how all three libraries in Oneida County saw a record number of people trying to connect to their internet the last few weeks as tourism season peaks.

"All three Oneida County libraries regularly have people in their parking lots connecting to WiFi throughout the day as well as before opening and after hours," said Wendt. "They're working virtually, telehealth appointments, if you can imagine taking one of those in your car, homework, job interviews, online classes."

A father of five in the audience spoke of watching his children struggle with slow internet while they were trying to learn remotely.

"What should have taken an hour would take four or five hours of meltdowns, crying, getting kicked out of classrooms repeatedly. That's a toll that doesn't show up on any economic development report, but it's a toll that for our parents, for our community. For those concerned about mental health in our state it should matter," he said.

All of these people and others who spoke up are hopeful a new fiber optics project will help improve connectivity and bring Oneida County up to speed with other parts of the state and country.

“The statistics in terms of recent surveys of people in Oneida County, 80% of households in rural Oneida County do not have access to what I would call broadband speeds above 25 megabits per second. That’s what we’re trying to get after,” said Jeff Verdoorn, Executive Director of the Oneida County Economic Development Corporation. It was one of the groups that submitted the project to PSC for approval and grant funding.



Evers has made broadband a priority, directing nearly 300 million dollars of state and federal funding to the issue over this time in office.

But Evers admits funding is only part of the solution, finding companies to do all the work needed could be a challenge in the Northwoods.

“I believe right now with new players in the game and more money there, there’s going to be people shifting around to make sure this industry stays strong, but that is a concern,” said Evers. “Anytime we take on a new project like this we need to make sure we have not only the resources, but the people who actually do the work.”

In addition to state funds and money that came to the state through federal coronavirus relief aid, some of which will be going to this specific project, Wisconsin got more than 100 million dollars from the federal infrastructure bill.

<https://www.wxpr.org/business-economics/2022-07-13/evers-hears-oneida-county-broadband-struggles-as-psc-approves-major-infrastructure-project>

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Governor Tony Evers with WVLS Consultant Kris Adams Wendt (left) and Rhinelander District Library Associate Director Debbie Valine following the July 12 Oneida County Broadband Forum.

Wendt summarized written testimony submitted by the Directors of the Edward U. Demmer Memorial Library (Three Lakes), Minocqua Public Library and Rhinelander District Library regarding the challenges of meeting Internet connectivity needs of area residents and visitors without reliable broadband access, especially during peak tourist months.