



How to help rural areas thrive

Wisconsin bills take systematic approach to tackling challenges in four key areas: education, health care, jobs and technology

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By 2035, people 65 and older will make up more than 27 percent of the population in 29 of Wisconsin's 72 counties.

This is a looming demographic crisis that rural legislators have been watching for years. Moreover, a generation of outmigration has drained resources needed to fully support a rapidly aging population, and many building blocks of vibrant communities are facing strain.

As the youngest legislator in Wisconsin's Statehouse and the former mayor of the rural city of Rice Lake, I came to Madison having seen firsthand the challenges rural Wisconsin is facing — but also knowing intuitively the incredible wealth of resources that rural citizens possess.

Rural Wisconsinites are resilient, resourceful and second to none in their willingness to work hard. But for too long, they haven't had access to the same opportunities that their urban and suburban counterparts have.

Working alongside my Assembly colleagues Reps. Ed Brooks and Travis Tranel, I began a movement we called the Rural Wisconsin Initiative, a group that came to include 26 representatives from all corners of the state.

We had in common a rural background and a strong sense of urgency to make sure that rural Wisconsin had the resources it needed to thrive.

Four crucial areas for improvement

We have chosen to focus on four critical sectors where, if given a little more opportunity, rural residents would be able to realize significant results.

These areas are education, health care, workforce development and technology, particularly broadband internet access. Tying these areas together and addressing rural needs systematically was a major step forward in how legislators in Madison began to understand and address our state's "opportunity gap."

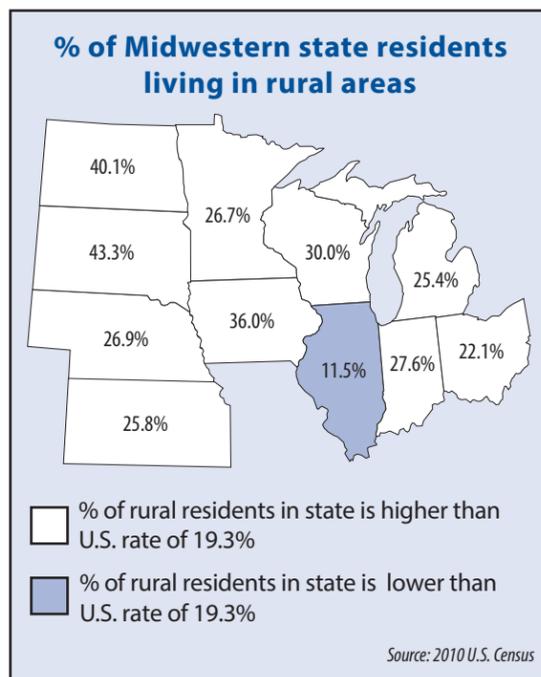
Rural broadband access has been the highest priority: Broadband is the critical 21st-century infrastructure, much as highways were critical in the 20th century.

Urban ambulances can send updates ahead to hospitals with critical information on a patient's condition because they have access to high-speed networks. Suburban students don't have to worry about loading speeds for educational programs at home. Entrepreneurs in Milwaukee and Madison don't have to depend on cell-phone hot spots to run an online business.

Rural people need the same opportunities.

We introduced our first legislative package last session — eight bills that together addressed all four of our Rural Wisconsin Initiative's priority areas.

The tent-pole bill looked to expand the Broadband Expansion Grant program. Created by Gov. Scott Walker in 2013, this program operates as a public-private partnership, bringing local



stakeholders together to ensure community buy-in and to maximize resources. Our bill called for expanding annual funding for this program to \$10 million from its current \$1.5 million.

To address health care, we called for \$250,000 in funding for the Wisconsin Rural Physician Residency Assistance Program, which helps expose physicians to residencies in rural areas. Doctors who conduct their residency in a rural area have an 86 percent likelihood of staying there, so expanding these programs would significantly expand the pipeline of doctors coming into such areas.

Other bills focused on helping grow our rural workforce and bolster education.

We proposed increased support of STEM schools and grants that reimburse apprentices and their sponsors for up to 25 percent of the cost of a completed apprenticeship.

Another bill, modeled on Kansas legislation, called for the creation of Rural Opportunity Zones. If a person with a postsecondary degree who had lived outside of Wisconsin for five years moved to certain rural areas in the state and kept a job, Wisconsin would repay at least part his or her student loan (up to 40 percent of it or \$25,000).

Of the eight original bills, two passed. One measure expanded to rural areas a program under which students pursuing a career in education can have their school loans forgiven if they spend five years teaching in Milwaukee. We knew that young teachers take about five years to decide whether or not to stay in their careers, and that many students wanted to return to their rural communities but couldn't due to the burden of student loans.

Another bill created a Broadband Forward! Community certification for local governments that adopt a standardized process for implementing broadband projects.

Both of these programs have shown meaningful results in less than a year. We have seen \$97,000 of loan forgiveness for teachers under our expanded

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program. And towns, villages, cities and counties have registered to be Broadband Forward! Communities, with the town of Thorp getting an \$800,000 broadband infrastructure grant in the wake of its certification.

A new understanding of rural issues

More than any single legislative accomplishment, though, the Rural Wisconsin Initiative has shown our legislative colleagues the urgency of the situation.

As our state's 2017-19 budget process took shape, our message for rural Wisconsin gathered steam. Gov. Walker followed our lead, placing a total of \$14 million into the budget for the Broadband Expansion Grant Program.

He also picked up our rural-physician funding bill, ensuring that new residency positions would be opened in rural areas and targeted to women's health.

Through this success, members didn't rest on our laurels. We built strong connections with Senate champions such as Sens. Patrick Testin and Howard Marklein, and launched a second health-care package of four bills.

Two of these measures, which aim to increase rural training programs for health professionals, were adopted in the new budget, while the others are working through the committee process.

Rural Wisconsinites are resilient and resourceful. We can make significant impacts with relatively low-cost investments that focus on building sustainability through public-private partnerships wherever possible.

We are proud, too, that both packages of bills have had bipartisan support. By bringing legislators together, this ongoing initiative will help ensure rural residents equality of access to the wealth of resources in our state. ★

Rep. Romaine Quinn, a Republican from Rice Lake, was first elected to the Wisconsin State Assembly in 2014.

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