The importance of broadband in Wisconsin has taken on a greater importance than ever before. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic has compelled schools to rely on learning via the internet. Throughout the state, school districts are grappling with how to provide devices and internet access to students without them. These children live in both cities and rural areas. They are disproportionately low-income and students of color.

Some of my constituents tell me that when they are working from home, they are competing for internet access with their children who are doing online classes. When parents lose their jobs and are trying to cut expenses, internet service may be on the chopping block.

A ROLE FOR GOVERNMENT

I believe government’s role is to nudge internet service providers to expand their infrastructure so every household and business has access to reliable, high-speed service. I support partnerships between private internet providers and municipalities.

If a private provider declines to act, I want to enable municipalities to establish their own internet service in order to serve their citizens.

During our 2020 legislative session, my colleagues and I introduced six bills aimed at improving the broadband infrastructure. One bill, SB 836, would remove current statutory barriers that prevent municipalities from constructing and operating their own broadband infrastructure. Under our legislative proposal, if a municipality decides to embark on such a project, it could apply for a broadband expansion grant from the state to fund up to 50 percent of the cost of hiring a broadband director.

We dubbed our second proposal “Fiber to Farms” (AB 655); it would prioritize Wisconsin’s broadband expansion grants to farms. (Current law gives priority to projects that satisfy various requirements, but does not prioritize farms.)

I disagree with the idea that family farms need to “get big or get out.” Family farms don’t need to get bigger; they need access to markets suitable for small farms and access to precision agriculture practices. And for that, they need access to reliable, high-speed internet service. Our third measure is SB 835, dubbed “Dig Once” because it would allow municipalities, counties and the state Department of Transportation to require contractors to install empty conduit lines on right-of-way highway projects and sidewalk projects. The empty conduit lines would then be available for future fiber optics expansion. In addition, if the owner of a structure within 300 feet of a right-of-way project requests it, an internet service provider must offer service to the structure.

Under SB 838, the Broadband Grant Integrity Act, provisions would be added to state law that if grant recipients live up to the promises they make in grant applications. For example, grant recipients must guarantee specific minimum download and upload speeds. If those or other conditions are not met, the state would recoup the grant dollars. In addition, our Legislative Audit Bureau would conduct performance evaluations to ensure compliance.

The Broadband Truth in Advertising bill (SB 837) would make it easier for consumers to compare broadband services by requiring providers to use standardized labeling (similar to food labeling). SB 837 also defines broadband as a minimum of 25 Megabits per second while downloading and three Mbps while uploading, or the federal definition of broadband, whichever is greater. The final bill, AB 959, would improve mapping of our internet infrastructure. It requires electrical utilities to survey their residential and business customers to identify what internet service is available to them. Electric utilities would be reimbursed for the surveys. The information gleaned from this mapping will give us a better understanding of gaps in our broadband infrastructure. The bill also would increase grant funding by $100 million for one fiscal year.

The Legislature didn’t act on any of these bills.

One measure did pass the Assembly: AB 344, which repeals a property tax on infrastructure that is used to provide internet service in rural and underserved areas. Reducing the cost of the physical infrastructure will provide an incentive to cooperatives and other small providers who want to expand rural coverage but are priced out of doing so.

As ranking member of the Assembly’s Rural Development Committee, I led my Democratic colleagues in giving unanimous approval to this bill, which was signed into law earlier this year. My colleagues and I will continue to try to advance the other bills in the upcoming session.

Wisconsin Rep. Don Vruwink is the ranking member on the Assembly’s Committee on Rural Development. He was first elected to the Legislature in 2016.