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Rural Leaders: Lack of Broadband Crippling Greater MN Communities *Group announces \$100M proposal to build broadband infrastructure*

ST. PAUL—Greater Minnesota is facing a serious economic crisis due to its lack of high-quality, high-speed broadband service. Data released to the GMNP by Strategic Networks Group found that if 95 percent of Minnesotans could access top-quality broadband, it would have a \$1 billion impact on the state's gross domestic product. However, only 32 percent of households in Greater Minnesota are currently connected to high-quality broadband, compared to 92 percent of households in the metro area, according to data from ConnectMN.

This urgent need for border-to-border broadband was highlighted at a press conference held this morning by the Greater Minnesota Partnership (GMNP), a non-profit organization that advocates for state policies that will bring economic growth to Greater Minnesota. Business owners, education and health care professionals, and community leaders teamed with lawmakers at the press conference to stress the need for broadband and offer a legislative package to address the problem.

Dave Horning, the owner of a tire and repair shop located outside of Herman, detailed his struggle to keep his business afloat as suppliers and customers increasingly rely on the Internet.

“It has become extremely difficult to run my business,” Horning said. “I don't have any Internet, nothing works out here. The need for good-quality broadband is going to get greater and the problem is going to get worse if something doesn't happen. A lot of us rural people don't know what do – we've just been forgotten by the rest of the state.”

Dan Dorman, executive director of the GMNP and a former state legislator, said he has heard similar stories in communities throughout Minnesota. “The top issue we've been hearing in every corner of the state is the need for broadband expansion,” he said, noting that a GMNP-conducted survey of Greater Minnesota business and city leaders found that high-quality broadband was the number one economic development need in their communities.

“In a global economy, for Greater Minnesota to not only compete with South Dakota, but also South Korea – we cannot have vast areas of our state offline and out of reach.” Dorman continued. “Obviously, the lack of adequate broadband is crippling many communities. It is the most important and critical issue facing Greater Minnesota today.”

Steve Niklaus, superintendent of schools in Annandale, emphasized the importance of broadband in education. He said the Internet service in Annandale is extremely expensive and ineffective, noting that it is slow and disconnects frequently, both in the classroom and at home.

“It really puts our students at a disadvantage,” Niklaus said. “We want to provide them with a great education, and dependable access to the Internet is absolutely a part of that.”

To combat this problem, the GMNP announced its support for legislation that would create a \$100 million state Broadband Infrastructure Fund. The fund, which was also recommended by the Governor’s Task Force on Broadband, would help bring reliable, lower-cost fiber technology to unserved and underserved parts of the state. The legislation is authored by State Sen. Matt Schmit (DFL-Red Wing) and Rep. Erik Simonson (DFL-Duluth), both Greater Minnesota lawmakers who recognize that the entire state needs high-quality broadband if it is to remain economically strong and globally competitive.

“A \$100 million investment in broadband is a small price to pay compared with the economic impact it will have on our state,” Dorman said. “Without it, Greater Minnesota and the rest of the state will continue to fall behind as everything from business to education to health care is increasingly done online.”

Horning agrees that it is well past time for the state to take action to tackle the lack of adequate broadband service and show its commitment to all of its residents.

“[Rural Minnesota] is a great place to live,” Horning said. “But without the Internet, it is really hard to keep our heads above water. Something needs to be done.”

The Greater Minnesota Partnership is a nonprofit corporation devoted to advocating for state economic development policies and resources that benefit Greater Minnesota. Its members consist of businesses, chambers of commerce, economic development authorities, cities and nonprofit organizations from throughout Greater Minnesota. For more information about the GMNP, please visit gmnp.org.

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