

# The Forum of Fargo-Moorhead

## Forum editorial: Fund rural Minnesota broadband

March 14, 2014

Minnesota will never be better positioned to start seriously expanding high-speed broadband into unserved and underserved reaches of the state. In the overwhelming majority of instances, those areas are rural districts and small towns, where there are too few customers per mile for private investors to go it alone.

Legislation in the St. Paul grinder would appropriate \$100 million (a modest start, since the need is said to be about \$3 billion) in a fund that would leverage other monies to finance broadband projects. Individual projects would be competitively bid, and sponsored by such organizations as cooperatives, economic development authorities or consortiums of small business and consumer groups. The partnerships would win grants based on criteria laid out in the legislation.

Apparently that sound model is not good enough for Gov. Mark Dayton. He said the proposal is not specific enough and that he wants certainty about individual projects, rather than proposals to be bid on. Therefore, he said, broadband legislation should wait until the 2015 legislative session.

That would be a mistake. First, the state's political landscape suggests broadband expansion would win support in the Legislature. Second, the state has a surplus and a projected surplus, so the timing to make smart long-term investments, such as rural broadband, is right. Third, potential private sector partners have expressed willingness to participate because state funding makes the numbers work for them.

Greater Minnesota is falling behind in the broadband revolution. The governor's proposed delay assures the state will fall further behind, and that the cost of playing catch up will escalate. The stakeholders in rural broadband expansion know what has to be done and they know how to do it. Customer demand is out there. The economic benefits the technology can bring will, in time, far outweigh initial investments.

Rather than seek a legislative delay, the governor should enthusiastically support legislation that would establish a \$100 million broadband infrastructure fund.

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