



February 15, 2019

Governor Tim Walz  
130 State Capitol  
75 Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.  
St. Paul, MN 55115

Dear Governor Walz,

Thank you for seeking out rural perspectives as you launch your vision for Minnesota in which everyone counts.

Encouraged by your invitation to share our experience and expertise, I am writing today to forward for your consideration a set of recommendations from Blandin Foundation's Broadband Strategy Board, a diverse group of rural stakeholders we turn to for counsel in our broadband work.

With the board's guidance, for more than a decade Blandin Foundation has worked with many partners to accelerate broadband deployment and spur technology use across the entire state. Using our own resources, we have leveraged federal stimulus, State of Minnesota (DEED and IRRR) funds, and broadband provider and local community match to support hundreds of community technology initiatives in tribal communities, cities, school districts, townships, counties and economic development regions across the state. When we started our work, hardly anyone knew what broadband was; today, no one has a fair shot in life without it.

During the 2018 election campaign, our Blandin Broadband Strategy Board sent you and other candidates for statewide and legislative offices a letter with recommendations on broadband. Today, I am following up on that letter by forwarding additional input from our Strategy Board on a short list of broadband topics that build on considerable progress made on this critical priority for our state.

I hope you and your administration will continue to view Blandin Foundation as a partner and resource in rural community building.

Sincerely,

Kathleen R. Annette  
President & CEO

cc: Steve Grove  
Danna MacKenzie

## **Recommendations to the Governor**

### **Border to Border Broadband: Elements of Success**

Based on the diversity of our experience, perspectives and knowledge of rural Minnesota;

Understanding that internet connectivity has become essential to individual and economic competitiveness;

Persuaded that the lack of optimum connectivity to the national and global economy is a major barrier to equal opportunity and economic development;

Concerned that more than a half-million Minnesotans still lack access to a wired connection capable of very minimal upload and download speeds; and

Alarmed by growing disparities in digital access and literacy in our state,

We, the members of the Blandin Foundation Broadband Strategy Board, offer these recommendations for accelerating broadband access and adoption to Governor Walz and his administration in service to achieving equal opportunity for all.

#### **Governor's Broadband Task Force**

We believe that the re-establishment of this influential group is important to addressing Minnesota's broadband shortcomings. By establishing this task force as an advisory group to the Governor, non-partisan, informed counsel can be provided to both legislative and executive branches. Previous task forces have been instrumental in setting Minnesota's broadband goals and tracking progress toward those goals as well as recommending proactive broadband deployment strategies.

We recommend that the task force focus on ensuring that all communities in Minnesota have access to the broadband networks they need to survive and thrive. The task force should revisit current state goals to determine whether they are adequately ambitious to support the One Minnesota vision. It can identify barriers and recommend future-oriented strategies designed to get Minnesota where it needs to be. Rural businesses have special connectivity needs and their concerns should be reflected in state goals.

For the task force to do its best work it is important that it be diverse in composition. The body should reflect a fair balance of perspectives, experiences and interests, proactively ensuring that the voices of Minnesotans who are unserved and underserved -- including especially rural people, tribal community members, and other historically marginalized communities -- are heard alongside those of industry. Internet service providers represented on the task force should have a demonstrated record of engaging in effective partnerships with rural communities and should include at least one of Minnesota's fiber-based broadband cooperatives that are providing real broadband solutions for rural Minnesota.

Finally, quality facilitation and professional staff support is key to quality outcomes for the task force, from a positive experience on the part of task force member volunteers to informed, balanced, and public-minded counsel to the governor and the legislature.

### **State Support for Broadband Infrastructure**

State investment in projects that bring broadband to un- and underserved rural communities has been essential to the progress made to date on Minnesota's broadband goals.

Many of Blandin's broadband funds are dedicated to helping rural communities participate successfully in state-funded broadband investment programs. We support community teams as they get organized, set goals, build political consensus, gather critical broadband planning information, conduct feasibility studies and create partnerships with broadband providers. Many of the community-based projects built with state investment were catalyzed or accelerated with Blandin assistance. To maximize the public benefit of this public investment, it is important that any policy change affecting specific program rules prioritize benefits to communities, businesses and residents over the interests of any existing providers.

### **Office of Broadband Development**

The Office of Broadband Development has done an outstanding job administering the grant program and navigating the competing interests of broadband stakeholders. This work should continue.

But broadband access is not enough to close the digital divide that threatens our state's future prosperity. People also need the skills to use it. Delivering on the full value of broadband investments also requires public investment to spur the adoption and use of broadband-enabled tools and create tech-based rural transformation. We agree with the recommendation of the former Governor's Broadband Task Force that the Office of Broadband Development, housed with the Department of Employment and Economic Development, is well-positioned to coordinate the implementation of state investments in broadband adoption.

Signed,

Broadband Strategy Board members

Joe Buttweiler  
CTC - Consolidated  
Telecommunications Company

Stacy Cluff  
Mille Lacs Energy Cooperative

Mark Erickson  
RS Fiber Cooperative

Nancy Hoffman  
Chisago County HRA-EDA

Jon Linnell  
North Region Health Alliance

Marc Johnson  
East Central Minnesota  
Educational Cable Cooperative

Scott Marquardt  
Southwest Initiative Foundation

Betsy Olivanti  
UMD Center for Economic  
Development

Dan Pecarina  
Hiawatha Broadband Communications

Rich Sve  
Lake County Commissioner

James Weikum  
Arrowhead Library System and  
Mayor of Biwabik

Madonna Yawakie  
Turtle Island Communications