



KEY ISSUES IN WESTERN WISCONSIN

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Supported by



Our Tri-State Economy

Well-positioned along Wisconsin's Western border, the La Crosse Area draws workers from a tri-state area to fuel its economy. With a population of 119,193, and industry centered in healthcare, higher education, manufacturing, retail and more, La Crosse is an economic destination for our region.

CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

BROADBAND

In a COVID-19 world, the importance of the essential service of broadband and the realities of the digital divide has clearly highlighted the need for broadband infrastructure in our communities. The competition for talent is driving companies to locate in areas where people want to make not only a living but make their lives, creating a shift in the way we approach community and connectivity. To attract and retain employees, communities are focusing on delivering the amenities, culture and lifestyle that talent seeks. With access to the Internet, work is no longer place-bound which can level the playing field for Rural America while also creating a new set of challenges in competing for people and businesses.

High-speed Internet access is no longer a luxury but an essential part of everyday life. Families rely on connectivity for almost all aspects of their lives from completing homework assignments to communicating with family around the world. The growing remote workforce presents opportunities for jobs around the world to be filled by rural residents if they can access an adequate Internet connection. Businesses, Healthcare, and Educational Systems today rely more and more on quality connectivity as they communicate with customers, patients and students to offer services.

In order to retain and attract residents and businesses to our communities, high-speed Internet needs to be both available and affordable. Without high-speed internet, our rural communities will continue to experience population decline and potential loss of businesses, which in turn translates to economic challenges for rural Wisconsin. Rural Electric Cooperatives want to be part of the solution in bringing high-speed internet to communities across Wisconsin and look forward to working with the Legislature and Public Service Commission to make that happen.

TRANSPORTATION

Efficient transportation is an essential component of living and working here. Our regional airport is one of the core drivers of economic vitality in this area, both for existing companies and those looking to move to Greater La Crosse. We encourage additional funding for airport improvements and support the pursuit of additional air service options to enhance economic impact and offer ease of use for the airport's many business flyers.

Transporting our workforce to where they need to be more safely is paramount. Especially as our community works to counteract lost revenue and operational challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the smallest delay in transport and supply chains can be devastating for these companies. We support the development of funding mechanisms to support state and local road improvements.

As a community situated on the Mississippi River, much of our economic impact centers on the commercial and recreational opportunities it supplies. We advocate for a balanced use approach to maintaining and improving the Mississippi River and its surrounding areas.

UWL BUILDING PROJECTS

We encourage funding of the following:

Prairie Springs Science Center Phase II

Completes construction of the Science Center, providing student-centered, technology-rich spaces to maximize collaborative learning and meet enrollment demands. (\$92,799,000)

Residence halls elevator tower additions

Adds elevator tower additions on four residence halls, which will be able to accommodate a stretcher for emergencies, and which meet federal accessibility standards. (\$9,642,000)

Mitchell Hall HVAC system replacement

Replaces under-performing HVAC system equipment and controls, dating from original constructions in 1964 and 1970 with a new programmable system. (\$26,329,000)

Center for the Arts parking ramp & police building addition

Constructs 550-stall parking ramp that replaces capacity losses due to fieldhouse, residence hall, and municipal parking restrictions. Constructs an addition to Police Services Building for training and emergency incident command center. (\$21,582,000)

The Path Forward in Western Wisconsin

CHILDCARE

The childcare industry in Western Wisconsin has been drastically affected by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. With already low profit margins prior to the pandemic, childcare providers have seen expenses rise both for everyday operating costs such as food and for additional supplies such as PPE and cleaning products, needed to adhere to safety guidelines. In addition, they have seen a drop in income and loss of income stability due to lower enrollment and quarantines for both providers and families. While this story of a struggling industry may not be unique, it does have unique impact. When parents lose access to childcare, they can't go to work, jeopardizing the stability of the companies they work for. The ripples of lost access to childcare are impacting the economic vitality of our region. We recommend financially incentivizing childcare owners to reopen, and financially supporting the increased costs associated with that including possible wage supplementation in the industry as a long-term strategy for attracting and retaining high quality care providers.

WORKFORCE

Western Wisconsin businesses have displayed impressive commitment in the face of an unknown future and have sacrificed to keep doors open and workers employed. Our area's unemployment is trending in the right direction. Yet, La Crosse County has a long journey to reach our unemployment rates of 2.7% from March 2020 (Job Center of Wisconsin). While we are fortunate to continue to track below the national unemployment rate shared by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, our county's 5.3% for August 2020 (Job Center of Wisconsin) remains painful in an area whose 2019 rate was 2.9% (Job Center of Wisconsin). A unique employment picture has developed, with significant numbers of unemployed workers and a high number of employers struggling to find workers. In addition, the rising number of positive cases in our region and state creates uncertainty and an unstable workforce as we head into the holiday season which typically sees an increase in temporary labor force.

K-12 EDUCATION

The K-12 education system in Western Wisconsin is critical for quality of life as well as workforce attraction and retention. Broadband access has quickly become an essential catalyst for delivery of these education services throughout the region. Similarly, a focus on equitable funding, programming, and employment within the K-12 system are vital for creating a community where all feel welcomed. We support the expansion of broadband access throughout the state, alongside the efforts of the Governor's Task Force on Broadband Access, and encourage support at the state level for equitable and inclusive community schools programming.

HEALTHCARE

Continuation of Access to Telehealth Services

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Western Wisconsin's primary health care providers—Gundersen Health System and Mayo Clinic Health System—have conducted telehealth visits at unprecedented levels. Telehealth waivers and flexibilities instituted at both the federal and state levels have made it possible for providers to care for patients across state lines, for patients to receive care in their own homes, and for patients to access audio-only telehealth services. The Chamber asks that you make permanent these flexibilities and waivers, while working to expand broadband so those in rural areas can have greater access to telehealth.