

Gov. Pritzker Announces \$50 Million Second Round of Capital Funding to Further Statewide Broadband Expansion

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STAUNTON — Governor JB Pritzker announced today that the state is releasing \$50 million in funding for the second round of matching grants through Connect Illinois, the state's \$420 million statewide broadband expansion plan. Illinois' Office of Broadband will support expanded connections in new communities across the state through an application to be made available today, which will remain open through February 2021. Funding for the program is made possible by Governor Pritzker's bipartisan Rebuild

Illinois capital plan, the first comprehensive infrastructure program in Illinois in nearly a decade.

“Connect Illinois is the largest and best crafted state matching grant program for broadband development in our nation’s history,” said Governor JB Pritzker. “It leverages state dollars to bring federal and private dollars in, more than doubling the number of dollars getting put to work to upgrade our digital infrastructure and delivering demonstrable change to people’s lives and real opportunity for new business development and new jobs. The ability to plug in to the digital revolution revolutionized the lives and livelihoods of so many Illinoisans before COVID-19 – and the lack of fast internet access had unacceptable consequences for too many of our residents. Connect Illinois is about giving all our communities access to 21st century digital connectivity for health care, education, and economic opportunity.”

This availability of additional funding builds on the inaugural round of funding released earlier this year, which supported 28 projects collectively slated to support over 26,000 new or enhanced connections serving every corner of the state.

Eligible applicants include internet service providers, rural cooperatives, nonprofits and local governments. Up to \$5 million per project will be available during the second round, and subsequent rounds will follow over the course of the next several years. The second round of Connect Illinois calls for a nonstate match component requiring companies to dedicate funding that will accelerate the delivery of broadband investments.

“Now more than ever before, high speed broadband access is essential to the economic productivity and prosperity of our Illinois communities, which is why we are pleased to bring forward the second round of funding for Connect Illinois,” said Erin Guthrie, Director of the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO). “Through our Office of Broadband, we are committed to ensuring that every Illinois community has the tools they need to plan, implement and ensure utilization of high-speed internet for all of their residents. This latest round of funding will build on the success of round 1, delivering tens of thousands of new connections to places with the greatest needs, which will fuel new economic opportunity for those who live there.”

The application for the second round of funding largely mirrors requirements of the first application – including a 50 percent nonmatch in most cases. To ensure an equal playing field, the administration has instituted an exemption allowing a lower nonstate match for project proposals concerning economically distressed communities. This program change acknowledges the difficulty of connecting the hardest-to-serve areas of Illinois, and the compounding challenges created by the COVID-19 crisis, allowing underserved communities to be competitive when applying for critical infrastructure dollars.

“The lack of reliable access to quality internet service affects every facet of life in Downstate Illinois, and the COVID-19 pandemic has only widened the existing gap between us and the rest of the state,” said State Senator Andy Manar (D-Bunker Hill). “We continue to prioritize broadband expansion in the state budget because it is the starting point for effective remote learning, dependable telehealth care services, and growing small businesses to revitalize the downstate economy. I want to thank Governor Pritzker for his steadfast partnership in continuing to push this important issue in Springfield.”

The first round of the Governor’s broadband expansion initiative provided \$50 million in state funding to leverage \$65 million in nonstate match for a total impact of over \$115 million. Together, this public-private collaboration will extend the critical reach of fully scalable high-speed internet to more than 26,000 homes, businesses, farms, and community institutions throughout the state – with at least one project in each of the state’s 10 economic development regions.

Roughly one-third of the 18 first-round providers will have broken ground by the end of 2020, including Madison Communications’ \$5.1 investment to expand high-speed access to Macoupin and Madison Counties – made possible by a \$4.2 million investment by the state of Illinois. The Madison Communications project is the largest expansion project both in terms of geography covered, and with over 9,200 new or enhanced connections to be completed as part of the project.

“For the residents of predominantly rural Macoupin and Madison counties, access to high speed internet has always been a challenge—and it’s only been made more challenging as COVID-19 has made high speed internet a pre-requisite for so many things in school, work and in healthcare,” said Mary Schwartz Westerhold, Vice President at Madison Communications. “Thanks to this public and private partnership, the investments being made by Governor Pritzker and the State of Illinois through the Connect Illinois program and Madison Communications, our communities stand to receive an accelerated upgrade in technology that will help them become more connected and more efficient in their everyday lives. We look forward to delivering these improvements that will help our students, families, farmers and healthcare practitioners with the tools they need.”

“We applaud Governor Pritzker’s commitment to ensuring everyone in Illinois has access to broadband, regardless of where they live,” said Randy Nehrt, Illinois Telecommunications Association. “The Illinois Telecommunications Association and our member companies look forward to continuing the public private partnership established in the Connect Illinois broadband grant program to provide reliable, high-speed Internet that gives all Illinois residents the opportunity to work and learn from home, take advantage of telehealth services and connect with family and friends.”

In addition to providing universal access to basic broadband for homes, businesses, and community anchor institutions by 2024, the State's broadband plan seeks to improve utilization of broadband for various uses in education, telehealth and economic development. All Connect Illinois projects must meet the minority business participation requirements of the State of Illinois' Business Enterprise Program.

"Madison Communications is a vital partner to our hospital. In 2007 they brought us a fiber-optic connection that allowed our hospital to transmit data and communicate rapidly and securely with premium quality. This greatly improved the lives and medical outcomes of the patients we serve," said Sue Campbell, CEO of Community Hospital in Staunton. "With the help of Governor Pritzker's Connect Illinois grant program, Madison Communications will bring high quality broadband to more of our patients; this will allow for better access to specialty care and critical mental health services in our region."

Source funding for Connect Illinois is from Rebuild Illinois, Governor Pritzker's historic \$45 billion capital bill. The plan dedicates \$420 million toward broadband infrastructure, including \$400 million for the Connected Illinois program – the country's largest matching grant program for broadband ever. The Connect Illinois investment is part of an increasingly comprehensive Illinois Office of Broadband approach that includes new and forthcoming work in broadband community planning and capacity building, interactive mapping, various digital equity initiatives, and a 41-county computer refurbishing network based out of Metro East.

For more information on the Notice of Funding Opportunity and to view the application, please visit the [Connect Illinois page](#).