

# Bevcomm looks to Walz for broadband support

JILL ROESLER  
*Staff Writer*

As everyone is well-aware, modern technology continues to evolve at a rapid pace. For some, these changes are normal and it's easy to keep up. But for others, access to new technology is difficult, or maybe it isn't even an option.

The latter is the case when it comes to high-speed broadband Internet service for Faribault County and the surrounding areas.

Bevcomm, the telecom provider headquartered in Blue Earth, serves 11,000 broadband subscribers in 23 rural communities in southern Minnesota and Wisconsin.

Although Bevcomm serves thousands of people, the company's president and CEO Bill Eckles, and general counsel Jim Beattie feel that their service is not reaching enough rural homes.

"There's only two providers left—everybody else has sold out, walked out," Eckles says. "The technology is there, but federal policy has become our biggest hurdle and it shouldn't be that way."

Tim Walz, the U.S. Representative from Minnesota's 1st District, visited Bevcomm last Tuesday to help Eckles, Beattie and Bevcomm's 105 service area employees jump over that federal policy hurdle.

The Connect America Fund, a program recently added under—and will soon replace—the Universal Service Fund (USF) is the Federal Communications Commission entity causing the issue.

"For almost three years now, the FCC has been dealing with the Connect America Fund for the larger connect companies like the CenturyLink and Verizons of the world," Beattie explains. "They've yet to address how they're going to deal with that issue for the small, rural companies like us."

In 2015, the FCC plans to provide \$1.8 billion in subsidies to Internet providers in rural areas to fund broadband expansion projects.

However, the large carriers like CenturyLink and Verizon Communications will have a chance to accept the subsidies to build out their broadband service before smaller providers such as Bevcomm.

Only if the large carriers reject the aid will the FCC award the subsidy to a smaller carrier based on a bidding procedure.

"Our biggest fear is that you get communities that simply want to over-build their private provider and use those funds, and we end up with the public competing against the private sector," Eckles explains.

Walz recognizes the barriers and agrees that broadband providers, large and small, should have an equal opportunity to compete for the subsidy.

"It's very hard when the playing field is tipped toward the larger providers," Walz says. "The way this system should work is, as long as it's fair—it's a level playing field—you compete on that."

However, Eckles worries

that any federal or statewide funding will go to areas that received service a long time ago as opposed to the rural areas that are still under-served or unserved entirely.

One of the funding priorities of the newly revealed Border-to-Border Broadband Development Program, a broadband grant program for Minnesota providers, is to offer new or upgraded services to existing community institutions.

Eckles lays out an example for Walz, a Mankato native, to illustrate why upgrades to existing areas is unnecessary when there are still plenty of areas that aren't served at all.

"You look at Mankato and Mankato isn't under-served or unserved, so the money shouldn't end up there, but potentially it could," Eckles says.

He goes on to explain that the Granada-Huntley-East Chain Elementary School does not have a broadband connection. However, because the school is not in Bevcomm's service area, it would cost close to \$100,000 to build a facility near the school.

"It's not in our serving area, so that's where the incentive money should be used—the areas that are truly unserved," Eckles says. "There are plenty of unserved areas to get our attention in the next five years. Once that's done, then we can worry about the under-served."

A lack of internet connection in rural schools is troublesome for Walz, especially considering the abundance of new tech-

based programs introduced in middle schools and high schools across the state, such as Blue Earth's new 1:1 Initiative.

"It's wonderful that they have these Wi-Fi iPads while they're at school, but if they don't have Wi-Fi when they're at home, what are kids going to do?" Walz posits. "That's when you've created a haves and have-nots situation."

Walz, Eckles and Beattie all agree that having high-speed broadband service is no longer a luxury for families—now, it is a necessity.

According to Walz, for students to be successful, for hospitals to share medical records efficiently and for public safety officials to report to the scene as quickly as possible, universal high-speed broadband is an absolute must for Faribault County and the surrounding areas.

"It's in our best interest to make high-speed broadband a necessity, just like clean water, just like electricity," Walz says. "It's an essential service now."

Walz assured Eckles and Beattie that he would begin working on these issues immediately so that rural areas could benefit as soon as possible.

"When I'm out here on the ground, it becomes much more personal," Walz adds. "This issue has bipartisan support because those of us in rural areas are on both sides of the aisle and rural issues trump the politics."