

## OpEd For Your Consideration

*Please consider publishing this OpEd piece by Blandin Foundation CEO, Dr. Kathleen Annette*

### **Rural Minnesota leading the way on broadband**

The momentum behind bringing broadband border-to-border is surging forward. It is built on a solid foundation of innovative, grassroots efforts--community work that has brought rural Minnesota from 52 percent coverage in 2010 to 80 percent coverage in 2016.

Getting us to the last mile and the last 20 percent, though, will require leadership, investment and cooperation at all levels.

At a November 2015 Blandin Foundation-DEED conference, statewide collaboration hit a high point when nearly 200 community leaders from across the state came together to design a shared vision for broadband in Minnesota:

*"Everyone in Minnesota will be able to use convenient, affordable world-class broadband networks that enable us to survive and thrive in our communities and across the globe."*

As basic as this vision sounds, Minnesota still is far from meeting it. According to the Department of Employment and Economic Development, nearly a quarter of rural Minnesota households lack speeds necessary to do online homework, run an online business or use budding telehealth options.

This stark urban/rural divide hurts all Minnesotans. It's time to look at investing together in solutions already forged at the local level.

It was clear during last year's Office of Broadband Development grant cycle that rural leaders are ready to act on community-created solutions. More than \$29 million in ready-made projects vied for the \$10.6 million available and we fully expect that number to grow this year.

This readiness did not come about by accident. A decade ago when Blandin Foundation started to focus on broadband, communities were hungry to get connected, but were busy building the bridge (designing an engagement process, researching resources, etc.) while trying to cross it.

That's not the case today. The bridge is built. Blandin Foundation has stood with nearly 80 Minnesota communities as they identified broadband priorities and connected to financial and relational resources they need to succeed.

At Blandin Foundation, we believe communities are at their strongest when they can name and claim the future they want. Rural Minnesota has put in the time and hard work to imagine what a connected future could look like. As a state, we need to come together to claim that future -- one that's bright for all Minnesotans.

- Dr. Kathleen Annette, president and CEO, Blandin Foundation

### **Questions, contact:**

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