

There's a challenge connecting Pierce County

In the Dec. 31 edition of The Journal, an article reported an analysis that painted a somewhat rosy picture for broadband in Pierce County that originated in a study from Forward Analytics, which bills itself as “a Wisconsin-based research organization that provides state and local policymakers with nonpartisan analysis of issues affecting the state. The mission of Forward Analytics is to use the best data available to highlight challenges facing the state, and to assist policymakers in understanding that data so they can make informed policy decisions.”

Pierce County Economic Development Corporation (PCEDC) offers the following response to the recent Journal article, “Broadband Access Lags in Rural Wisconsin.”

“Don't be fooled by the Forward Analytics research that was quoted in the December 31, 2020 Journal article.

“The infographic suggests that 94.5% of rural Pierce County residents have a highspeed connection of 25Mbps/3Mbps speeds. This is not true.

“The support for this research is based on FCC Form 477 data provided to the FCC by telecommunication entities. “Telecommunications providers are required to report the level of services they provide in their service territory via the Form 477. The reporting is done at the census block level. If the provider makes available a service to a single customer in a census block that census block is considered as having service even if it is the only one customer being served.

“Pierce County has 2,056 census blocks. The December 2019 Form 477 report shows 18 telecommunication holding companies that reported services in Pierce County. These include satellite providers such as ViaSat and fixed wireless providers such as Hiawatha Broadband Communications (HBC).

“The Forward Analytics report considered and included only the non-satellite service options.

“Fixed wireless was included in their analysis. HBC reported serving 1,227 census blocks of the County's 2,056 blocks with download speeds of 40 Mbps. The HBC blocks not served, based on a review of the Wisconsin state broadband map, include the census blocks in the northwest and northeast corners of the County and the City of River Falls. Including the census blocks HBC serves in the Forward Analytics analysis results in the erroneous conclusion Pierce County has 94.5% broadband coverage at speeds of 25+ mbps.

“Satellite and fixed wireless require a clear line of sight. You shouldn't have to cut down your trees for access. A true measure of rural broadband should include upload speed, usage caps, cost, and actual availability not advertised speed. For a more in-depth discussion on why fiber to the premise is the longterm solution to quality broadband service to Pierce County residents read the “Exploring the Benefits of High-Speed Broadband for Pierce”, November 2020 issued by Pierce County Economic Development Corporation, found at www.pcedc.com.

“The Forward Analytics study does not provide an accurate analysis of Pierce County's broadband service. They acknowledge in their report the shortcomings of the FCC data allowing credit for broadband service when one resident has access and the remaining residents in the census block may not have access but proceeded to draw conclusions based on these shortcomings. The FCC has work to do on accurately identifying broadband needs. “We have a challenge across the state connecting rural Wisconsinites. Don't be fooled by faulty research based on bad data. This is a serious challenge ahead of us that must be solved.”

