Mr. Marc Johnson
Executive Director
East Central Minnesota Educational Cable Cooperative (ECMECC)
Braham, MN

May 30, 2019

Chair Golden, Rep. Stauber, members, staff, guests:

Small businesses are the lifeblood of communities and rural areas in East Central MN, throughout the state and around the nation. Agriculture, tourism, hospitality, manufacturing, healthcare, retail and other sectors rely on the Internet to communicate with suppliers and customers, to provide their services and to stay viable. These businesses also need an educated workforce willing to live and raise families in rural areas.

Without access to affordable high speed Internet, businesses cannot thrive, families are less likely to locate in the area and it is difficult to provide a fair and equitable education. Those of us who commit to life in a rural community are forced to get by and make due with what we have.

Northland Automation and Engineering is an engineering and manufacturing company located in rural Kanabec County just a few miles from Mora, MN. The business is located on the farm of the company owner. If he or one of his employees wants to utilize simple video conferencing to talk with a client about custom parts and show them examples, they often must make a 30 minute round-trip into town to utilize an available location with high speed access capable of providing a stable video connection. He gets by, but comments about the limitations his company has for expansion and taking on additional clients when he is hampered by poor broadband access.

There are many stories available similar to this one and real estate agents in the area can verify that people will decide not to relocate to areas with poor broadband service. If we want a diverse workforce, strong communities and ample opportunities for everyone to reach their potential, we must move beyond just getting by.

How does education fit into this scenario? We live in a digital world and education is no different. The Internet is routinely used for research, collaboration, communication and general learning. We also know that learning does not take place only within the walls of a school building.

In education, we cannot just "get by." It is not OK for use to leave 20% or more of our students without the same learning opportunities as the other 80%. In the world of digital learning, that is exactly what is happening. In referencing one of the maps included in the packet, according to statistics from the MN Office of Broadband Development, 8 of the 12 school districts in the Region 7E economic development area are below 80% for percentage of households served by broadband speeds that fit the FCC definition of broadband and two are below 50% served.

Essentially, in these areas, we are leaving 20% to 50% of our residents behind. Many of which have children, some of whom are trying to run a farm or a small business from home and others who may be accessing online courses or completing assignments from higher education institutions. The technical and community colleges in our region have high numbers of working adult students who are not able to be on campus to complete assignments and/or who need to access online course content. These students are vital to development of our local workforce.

Most of the districts in our region have placed mobile devices in the hands of their students intended to be used both in class and at home and they are often cited as one of the most impactful technology related tools for teaching and learning. For example,

Troy Anderson, Principal at Pine City HS says, "Without a doubt, chromebooks have been the most impactful for our district. They have started to replace textbooks and are used for communication between students and staff."

Dr. Ray Queener, Superintendent for Cambridge-Isanti school adds - "As curriculum continues to migrate to digital and as more and more resources are available digitally, our chromebook 1:1 initiative has greatly impacted teaching and learning in our district."

Minnesota has a grassroots project called the Minnesota Partnership for Collaborative Curriculum. I'm proud to say that the schools in ECMECC were pioneering members of this collaborative that has grown to involve over 225 school districts. The goal of this project is to create a comprehensive collection of digital open education resources in the four core subject areas for grades 3-12. These resources are created by educators and centered around Minnesota's content standards and made available to Minnesota schools at no cost. They are designed to be used with the mobile devices that students are using and have the potential to replace the use of expensive textbooks and purchased content.

However, in our region, expensive and slow broadband hampers our ability to fully utilize these resources that our teachers helped create.

Dean Kapsner, Superintendent of Isle schools comments on this saying, "The lack of reliable Internet access affects how we can deliver curriculum and assignments outside the school day and has stalled our efforts to create a viable e-learning plan."

Steve Bistrup, Technology Coordinator in Milaca agrees, writing, "The lack of rural broadband has played a significant role in limiting our ability to fully transition to digital learning."

As with small businesses trying to thrive in this environment, schools find ways to make due. Long route busses in some of our districts are equipped with onboard wifi. Schools have purchased mobile hotspots to provide to students without adequate home access. But these solutions only work in areas where there is a reliable cellular connection, which cannot be assumed in many rural parts of our area. Other accommodations include keeping areas of the school open longer, providing printed or other offline materials, extending deadlines to turn in

homework and placing students in study halls rather than other classes. All of these accommodations result in some students not receiving the same, or in some cases even similar educational opportunities.

The Minnesota legislature passed a law in 2017 that allowed schools to use e-learning days in lieu of weather related school closings. To count as an instructional day, students need to be able to access assignments and resources online and teachers need to be available online to answer questions. This winter, some Minnesota districts utilized more than five of these days. In our region, no schools were able to take advantage of this opportunity because they could not count on all students or staff having adequate Internet access.

Superintendent Robert Prater of Hinckley-Finlayson schools indicated that - "We do not use e-learning days because broadband is not reliable enough or widespread enough for us to use e-learning."

Amanda Thompson, Technology Integration Specialist at East Central schools agrees saying, "I have concerns about both students and staff being able to access the Internet from home to fully engage in an e-learning day."

Our students and families are being left behind in the digital age. Craig Schultz, Superintendent of schools in Mora asks, "Is it truly a free and appropriate education when there are significant broadband access issues between families just miles apart in a district let alone between districts around the state?" We need to solve this issue or families will move away from rural areas with poor access and inequitable educational opportunities. There will be fewer people to fill jobs in the small businesses that have tried to get by and our rural communities and way of life will wither away. Like rural electrification and telephone did for rural areas in their times, we need rural broadband to make rural living viable and a choice that people want to seek out rather than flee.

Supplemental Information

The two attached maps are provided by the Minnesota Office of Broadband Development and the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development. The Region 7E economic development region includes the counties of Mille Lacs, Kanabec, Pine, Isanti and Chisago which you will see in the center, right portion of the maps. These counties remain as some of the most underserved regions in the State of Minnesota with respect to broadband service that meets the FCC definition of broadband. (speeds of 25 Mbps download and 3 Mbps upload)

The first map shows the percentage of households served by wireline broadband service that meets FCC definitions by county and the second map overlays Minnesota school district boundaries and breaks down the number of households served according to school district.
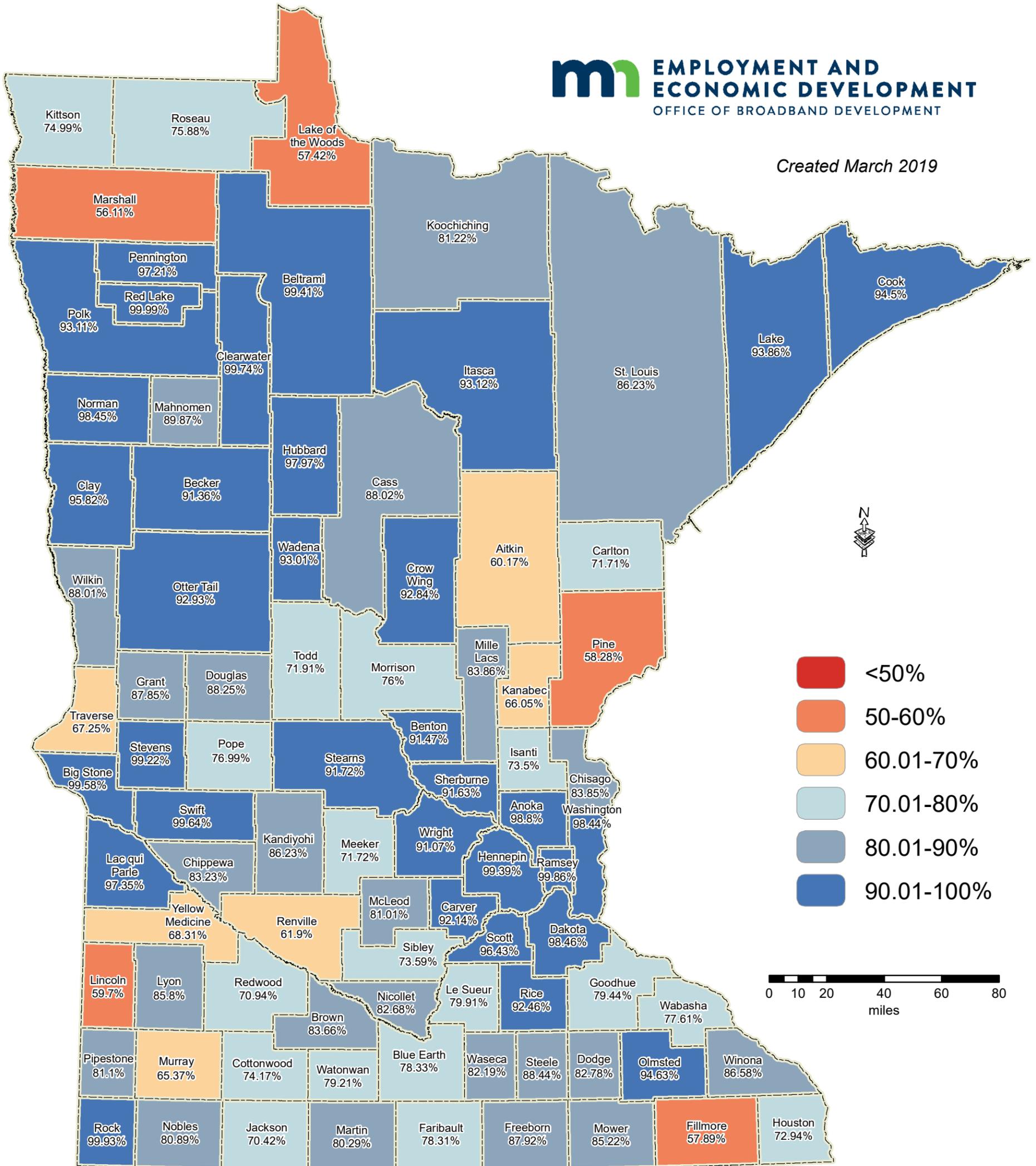
2019 Broadband Availability in the State of Minnesota

Percentage of Households Served by Wireline Broadband Service by County

At Least 25 Mbps Download/3 Mbps Upload Speeds
Statewide Availability: 92.70%, Rural: 83.71%

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Created March 2019

Kittson 74.99%
Roseau 75.88%
Lake of the Woods 57.42%
Marshall 56.11%
Koochiching 81.22%
Cook 94.5%
Pennington 97.21%
Red Lake 99.99%
Beltrami 99.41%
Lake 93.86%
Polk 93.11%
Clearwater 99.74%
Norman 98.45%
Mahnomen 89.87%
Itasca 93.12%
St. Louis 86.23%
Clay 95.82%
Becker 91.36%
Hubbard 97.97%
Cass 88.02%
Wadena 93.01%
Aitkin 60.17%
Carlton 71.71%
Wilkin 88.01%
Otter Tail 92.93%
Crow Wing 92.84%
Todd 71.91%
Morrison 76%
Mille Lacs 83.86%
Pine 58.28%
Grant 87.85%
Douglas 88.25%
Kanabec 66.05%
Traverse 67.25%
Stevens 99.22%
Pope 76.99%
Benton 91.47%
Isanti 73.5%
Big Stone 99.58%
Stearns 91.72%
Chisago 83.85%
Swift 99.64%
Sherburne 91.63%
Anoka 98.8%
Washington 98.44%
Kandiyohi 86.23%
Meeker 71.72%
Wright 91.07%
Lac qui Parle 97.35%
Chippewa 83.23%
Hennepin 99.39%
Ramsey 99.86%
Yellow Medicine 68.31%
Renville 61.9%
McLeod 81.01%
Carver 92.14%
Sibley 73.59%
Scott 96.43%
Dakota 98.46%
Lincoln 59.7%
Lyon 85.8%
Redwood 70.94%
Nicollet 82.68%
Le Sueur 79.91%
Rice 92.46%
Goodhue 79.44%
Wabasha 77.61%
Brown 83.66%
Pipestone 81.1%
Murray 65.37%
Cottonwood 74.17%
Watonwan 79.21%
Blue Earth 78.33%
Waseca 82.19%
Steele 88.44%
Dodge 82.78%
Olmsted 94.63%
Winona 86.58%
Rock 99.93%
Nobles 80.89%
Jackson 70.42%
Martin 80.29%
Faribault 78.31%
Freeborn 87.92%
Mower 85.22%
Fillmore 57.89%
Houston 72.94%

Legend
- <50%
- 50-60%
- 60.01-70%
- 70.01-80%
- 80.01-90%
- 90.01-100%

0 10 20 40 60 80
miles

Additional maps and data are available at
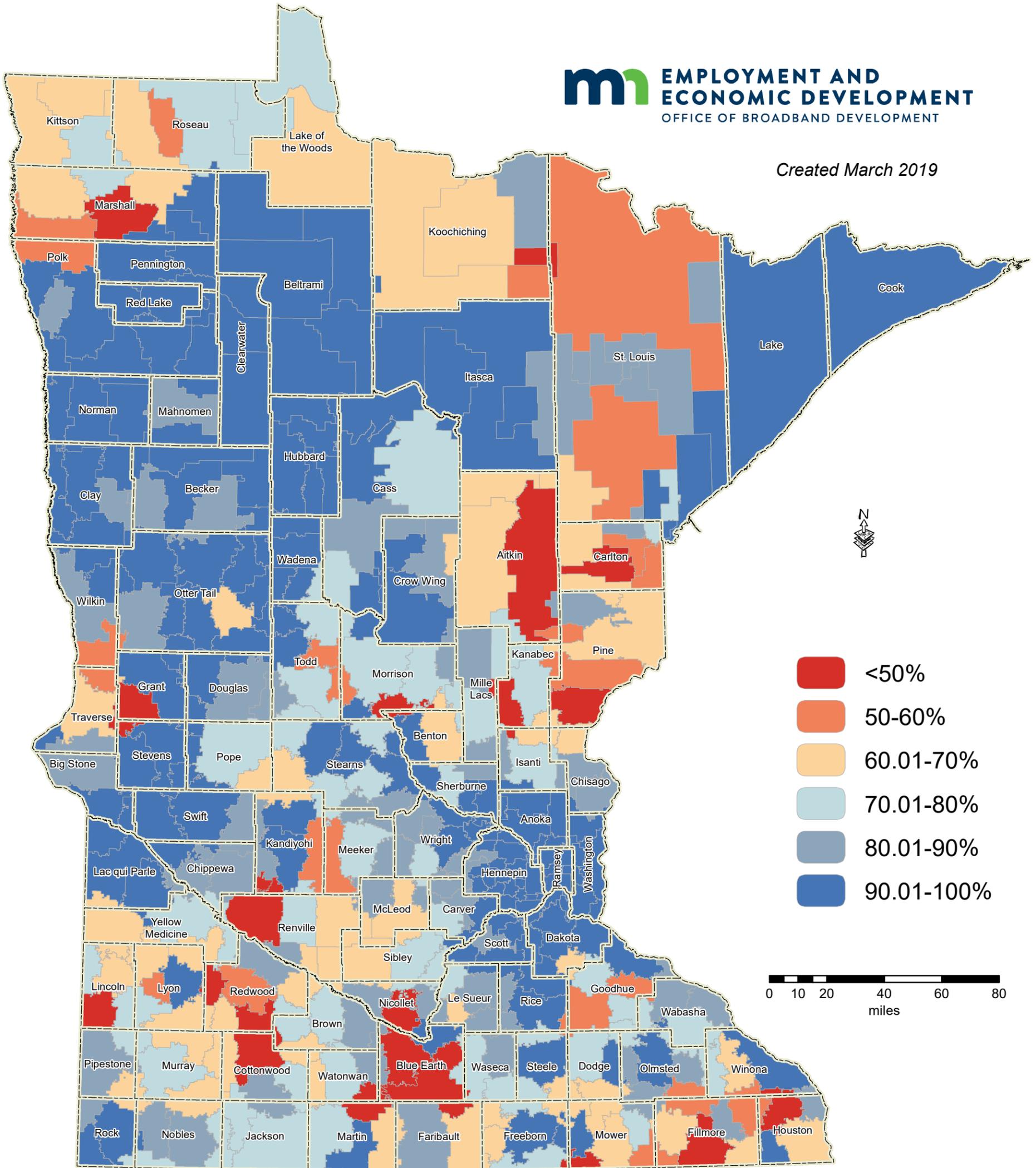http://mn.gov/deed/programs-services/broadband/maps

Upon request, this information can be made available in alternate formats for people with disabilities by contacting the DEED Office of Broadband Development at 651-259-7610.

2019 Broadband Availability in the State of Minnesota

Percentage of Households Served by Wireline Broadband Service by School District

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Created March 2019

Legend:
- <50%
- 50-60%
- 60.01-70%
- 70.01-80%
- 80.01-90%
- 90.01-100%

0 10 20 40 60 80
miles

This map was prepared by Connected Nation under contract with the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development. The map represents areas of broadband service availability based on provider data submitted to and analyzed by Connected Nation and modified based on validation tools. This data is current as of December 31, 2018.

Additional maps and data are available at
http://mn.gov/deed/programs-services/broadband/maps

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Submit questions or recommended changes to:
DEED.broadband@state.mn.us

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