

Melstrom honored as Wisconsin Recycler of the Year

The Associated Recyclers of Wisconsin (AROW) proudly held their annual awards ceremony last month at the 2022 Wisconsin Integrated Resource Management Conference (www.wirmc.org) in Green Bay. The ceremony, held on Feb. 24, recognized individuals and organizations for outstanding work in the field of recycling and waste reduction.

"AROW always looks forward to honoring those working hard in our industry. This year's recipients clearly demonstrate the strength of recycling in Wisconsin with achievements in private industry as well as education," said Meleesa Johnson, AROW's President. "AROW is the voice for recycling and waste reduction in Wisconsin and we are proud to recognize these individuals and groups."

The prestigious Christy Dixon Recycler of the Year Award was awarded to Steve Melstrom, retired Pierce County Solid Waste Administrator, located in Ellsworth. This recognition is given to an individual whose career demonstrates the highest professional standards. Melstrom has been a leader in the waste and recycling industry for over 30 years.

In his time with Pierce County, Melstrom has worked his way up to become the administrator and has overseen and advocated for many changes and improvements to the county's recycling system. Melstrom has been a part of the county's transition from source separated collection, to building a dual-stream recycling center, to adding new materials to their recycling stream over the years. He has helped expand access to drop-off sites across the county.

Melstrom was passionate about recycling education, particularly in schools. He worked with many of the counties school districts to help provide access to recycling containers, promote recycling at school and athletic events and provided a milk carton recycling program for schools.

Melstrom believed in the regional approach to recycling as evident through many partnerships with counties in western Wisconsin for education efforts, Clean Sweep Hazardous Waste collections and processing recyclables. Melstrom recently retired from Pierce County in January 2022. He is a wealth of institutional knowledge of the solid waste and recycling industry in western Wisconsin and will be truly missed in the industry in his retirement.

For more detailed information on each of our award recipients please go to our awards page on the AROW website at www.arow-online.org/awards.

AROW is a membership-based organization, serving the recycling and waste reduction interests of citizens, organizations, municipalities and businesses across the state. For those who support recycling and wish to see more waste diverted into productive use, consider joining the cause by becoming an AROW member.

About the AROW

Founded in 1990, AROW is an association representing Wisconsin's recycling, waste reduction and sustainability professionals. The organization provides leadership through education, advocacy, and collaboration and promotes effective, efficient and sustainable material recovery initiatives. For details on AROW, its positions and programs visit www.arow-online.org.

Submitted by Pierce County Solid Waste



Steve Melstrom, AROW 2022 Recycler of the Year, pictured with Megan Hines, AROW Board of Directors at the Wisconsin Integrated Resource Management Conference in Green Bay. Photo courtesy of Megan Hines

BROADBAND

From Page 1

5 Mbps compared to fiber-optic speeds that typically exceed 100 Mbps, is like driving the riding lawn mower to town instead of driving the pickup truck."

None of those sound pleasant, do they?

"In the 23 years I have lived here, no internet provider has shown any interest in delivering high speed service outside of the city," John Stark said. "I get robo calls every day from Spectrum, AT&T, etc. offering internet service, but when I tell them where I live, they hang up on me."

John Stark, who is a software engineer for Thomson Reuters, and Stephanie Stark, who is an adult program coordinator for WestCAP, at first felt fortunate to be able to work from home. Stephanie Stark had been working from home prior to the pandemic, but when John Stark joined her, that warm, fuzzy feeling soon faded into frustration as they struggled to complete everyday, required tasks for their employers.

The Starks' best option for internet service has been a Verizon Wireless cellular connection, which costs \$80 per month for 20 GB and measured speeds of 5 Mbps or less. This requires them to use three cell phones and hot spots. They still frequently go over their monthly data allotment, which carries an expensive price tag. The minimum standard for broadband as defined by the FCC is 25 Mbps, which allows people to easily surf the web, download files and video conference.

Because of slow internet speeds, John Stark needs to work longer hours in order to complete his assignments. He needs to use the lowest quality setting for video meetings; often his presented materials are illegible.

"Some tasks are impossible to perform over this slow connection," John Stark said. "I drive to the library to download a branch of code to edit or large log files to investigate and debug problems and to get the monthly Microsoft security and system updates."

Imagine trying to download 30,000 files from a depository on a slow internet connection. It's not happening. John Stark can now drive into work one day a week and do his file-intensive work. But during the pandemic, that wasn't an option. He often sat in the library parking lot on below-zero days, praying his computer battery wouldn't die as he downloaded files.

"There's always someone sitting in the car using the internet," John Stark said. "We're not alone. There's been a lot of people in our shoes."

Stephanie Stark, who serves low-income adults through WestCAP with a focus on education, works with many clients who can't afford to pay for internet access. This is a problem when, as John Stark says, internet service has become a de-facto utility. Local, state and federal governments often deliver services via the internet. Businesses expect their customers to interact with them through high-speed broadband. Employers expect their employees to be able to work from home over a high-speed connection.

Stark's clients have to apply for unemployment or benefits online. There's an element of digital equity thrown into the mix, when you consider some people can't afford the more expensive, often unreliable, internet plans available in rural areas. They have to be able to afford those services and devices to function in society.

"I work with many clients who can't even afford it," Stephanie Stark said. "All students need internet access, not even because of COVID. I can see how much of a challenge it is for many of my clients."

On a personal note, when Stephanie Stark had Zoom meetings with her work team or the Pierce County Human Services board, of which she is a member, she had to turn the camera function off. She takes classes from In Balance Yoga & Fitness, which went to Zoom during the pandemic. She appreciates the online option because she can open the computer and work out from the comfort of home, but she has to start early enough to make sure she can connect. Even her instructor has had issues offering the class online.

"Last Saturday, she had to drive into the owner's house where there is more stable internet," Stephanie Stark said. "I can hardly wait for SwiftCurrent Connect because it's right outside our house, so it won't interrupt instruction and us taking the class. It's a service that I enjoy."

The Starks also attend church services online and during the pandemic, some family funerals as well. John Stark tried to make a doctor appointment online; it proved to take less time to drive into town to the clinic and schedule it in-person.

"The data is supposed to be unlimited," Stephanie Stark said. "But it's not truly unlimited. What makes me mad is I can't even complain to Verizon. I could just buy more, but it's expensive. It doesn't seem fair that others pay the same and get better services."

The Starks are eagerly awaiting Phase 2 of the SwiftCurrent Connect fiber installation, which is when they are scheduled to receive service. Like rural mail delivery, telephone service and electricity, high-speed broadband will be a game changer for residents and businesses. During a recent virtual county board meeting, John Stark wanted to comment, but couldn't because of his internet connection. When he asks for meeting minutes, he's directed to the county website.

"All government delivers services to citizens online," John Stark said. "If citizens don't have access to the internet, then what are we doing? Maybe some people just use it (the internet) to look at a few Facebook posts or the ads at fleetfarm.com If they don't use it, they might not understand."

John Stark also points out that working from home, poor internet or not, kept a lot of people off unemployment and afloat. As the pandemic lessens, the need to work from home is not going to go away. His employer will be following a hybrid model where employees are expected to work from home three days per week.



The Barns of Lost Creek is a wedding venue in Beldenville. Owner Don Dufek says they have guests come from all over who expect a decent internet connection. Photo courtesy of Spicy Meatball Photography

"Many companies will be doing the same thing," John Stark said. "Companies can save a lot of money by reducing their office space. It would cut down on traffic. It sounds dramatic but, do you want to build roads or do you want to string a few wires? Put some dollars into it, not a just a nod of the head."

Barns of Lost Creek

Don Dufek and Melissa Deyo, who own and operate The Barns of Lost Creek wedding venue in the Town of Ellsworth, understand the Starks' frustration. They bought the barns nine years ago and are about to enter their seventh year of hosting weddings.

Dufek is candid when he says that his swearing vocabulary has increased thanks to the poor internet and cellular service.

"You're in the middle of a call or you're trying to do something on the internet, and you lose it," Dufek said. "We try to make light of the situation: Welcome to western Wisconsin, home of 1970 internet and 4G data. But there's a lot of head-shaking and disgruntled people sometimes."

Wait a minute – there wasn't internet in 1970 – Dufek's point exactly. They use a Verizon hotspot for their internet service, which can be a tenuous solution at best in their location.

"We get people from all over, business people who are trying to make their contacts and they look at us – you know, we're doing the best we can," Dufek said of the poor internet service. "It's hit and miss. Some days it's really efficient, some days you can't get it at all. It's a crap shoot."

The mom-and-pop operation also has poor cell phone service, which isn't ideal when relying on a cellular hotspot for internet. It's also infuriating as far as placing phone calls goes, another issue.

"The one that got me the worst, was it was a super-hot July day and the pastor of a wedding was fully dressed, an older guy who had quit eating and drinking for a retreat," Dufek said. "He passed out. We called 911, but lost the connection. Luckily, we had time to give them our address before the call dropped. And luckily, we had four nurses here at the time."

Well-meaning guests offer the couple advice all the time, pointing out different plans or places they could post an antenna. Dufek is looking forward to SwiftCurrent Connect's high-speed fiber connection being made available to his business. It will be a game-changer, a needed utility when serving guests who expect internet, even out in the country.

"It will connect us with the rest of the world," Dufek said. "Like with us, we get people from all over. It just looks better if people can connect. Basically, we're ambassadors of the area. If we have that, then it's another feather in our cap."

How did we get here?

Pierce County Economic Development Corp. Director Joe Folsom said the need for quality, high-speed broadband has been driven home during the pandemic.

"A service that was nice to have for social media, movie watching and occasional email became a critical piece of community infrastructure and to everyone's lives," Folsom wrote in "Exploring the Benefits of High-Speed Broadband for Pierce County." "The lack of broadband made it difficult to perform essential functions such as working from home, educating children, and conducting business. The sheer volume of internet traffic affected the quality of services that otherwise seemed acceptable. No longer could those functions be performed because the infrastructure was inadequate. It became impossible for one person to watch a movie, another to conduct a Zoom meeting while others were trying to do homework."

Broadband is largely unavailable in rural areas because communities don't have the infrastructure needed to provide service through existing phone lines or installing fiber-optic cables. There



SwiftCurrent Connect, a subsidiary of Pierce Pepin Cooperative Services, celebrated the connection of its first high-speed internet customer on Jan. 31, 2022. Image courtesy of SwiftCurrent Connect

are too few customers in rural areas for large broadband companies to expand service and gain a profit.

UpNorth News reports that in the 2021 Broadband Development Report, the Federal Communications Commission estimates 6.8% of Wisconsin residents (394,000 people) lack access to broadband service with adequate bandwidth, which is higher than the 4.4% national average. Of those, 385,000 people live in rural areas and make up 21.8% of the state's rural population. A 2019 report by Forward Analytics, which showed that 1 in 4 cannot access broadband in rural Wisconsin, shows that that number may actually be double, based on the way the numbers were tabulated.

In 2013, Gov. Scott Walker greenlighted a broadband grant program that awarded about \$44 million over five years to broadband expansion efforts. In March 2020, the state awarded \$24 million in broadband expansion grants to tribal and municipal governments followed by \$5 million in CARES Act funding in October 2020. Then in June 2021, Gov. Tony Evers declared 2021 "The Year of Broadband" and created the Task Force on Broadband Access, with a goal to connect every Wisconsin household to high-speed internet by 2025. In the 2021-23 biennial budget, the Legislature approved in June spending \$125 million on broadband expansion.

Locally, Pierce Pepin Cooperative Services launched SwiftCurrent Connect on July 14, 2021 in order to provide reliable, affordable, high-speed fiber internet to rural residents across western Wisconsin. The Wisconsin Public Service Commission awarded SCC three broadband expansion grants last fall totaling \$800,000.

SwiftCurrent Connect will use fiber optic cable, which will be installed overhead where power lines are overhead and buried where power lines are underground. Construction of Phase I, which will be approximately 175 miles of fiber and pass nearly 1,500 homes, began in September 2021. Last week, the 25th customer connected to the fiber network and starting this week, crews will begin inspecting overhead lines in Phase Two areas. Crews will begin working in the Beldenville substation area.

What can you do?

If you want to help bring high-speed broadband internet to Pierce County, you can join the advocacy efforts of Western Wisconsin Needs Broadband and Pierce County GrassRoots Organizing. To learn more about these nonprofit, nonpartisan organizations, their missions and how you can contribute to their efforts, visit piercecountygro.org or find WNNB on Facebook.

You can also write letters to or call your Pierce County Board Supervisor telling them why broadband expansion is important to you. They can be contacted by phone or email at:

- District 1 – Kris Sampson, 651-269-7902, kris.sampson@co.pierce.wi.us
- District 2 – Jim Ashbach, 715-425-0131, jim.ashbach@co.pierce.wi.us
- District 3 – Jon Aubart, 715-441-2604, jon.aubart@co.pierce.wi.us
- District 4 – Ruth Wood, 715-441-2081 or ruth.wood@co.pierce.wi.us
- District 5 – Jeff Bjork, 715-629-7655 or jeff.bjork@co.pierce.wi.us
- District 6 – Michael Kahlow, 715-426-5325 or michael.kahlow@co.pierce.wi.us
- District 7 – Scott Bjork, 715-377-3199 or scott.bjork@co.pierce.wi.us
- District 8 – Dean Bergseng, 715-425-6404 or dean.bergseng@co.pierce.wi.us
- District 9 – Paula Lugar, 715-778-4371 or paula.lugar@co.pierce.wi.us
- District 10 – Rodney Gilles, 715+317-0426 or rodney.gilles@co.pierce.wi.us
- District 11 – Neil Gulbranson, 715-781-4834 or neil.gulbranson@co.pierce.wi.us
- District 12 – Dale Auckland, 715-273-5937 or dale.auckland@co.pierce.wi.us
- District 13 – Daniel Puhmann, 715-497-2547 or daniel.puhmann@co.pierce.wi.us
- District 14 – Bill E. Schroeder, 715-792-2801 or bill.schroeder@co.pierce.wi.us
- District 15 – Jerry Kosin, 715-262-5677 or jerry.kosin@co.pierce.wi.us
- District 16 – Jeff Holst (chair), 715-792-2732 or jeff.holst@co.pierce.wi.us
- District 17 – Mel Pittman, 715-647-5023 or mel.pittman@co.pierce.wi.us

The Pierce County Board meets the fourth Tuesday of each month at 7 p.m. You can speak during public comment time (ironically, if you have internet access, since public participation is currently allowed virtually).



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Prescott family escapes house fire

Home is a total loss; community rallies

By Sarah Nigbor

PRESCOTT – Everyone was sleeping on the morning of Friday, Feb. 25 at 394 Gibbs St. when Ashley Boyer's 5-year-old nephew came into the bedroom and woke her up. She heard the words that we all dread. The house was on fire.

Boyer ran from her bedroom into the living

room, which was filled with smoke. She yelled for her 15-year-old son, John, who was sleeping downstairs. He immediately ran upstairs and whisked his 6-year-old sister, Sky, and Boyer's nephew out the door over to the neighbor's house.

Boyer attempted to put the fire out herself, but it was growing too quickly. Flames engulfed the drapes and the whole front of the house was

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A fire broke out at 394 Gibbs St. in Prescott on Friday, Feb. 25. The home is considered a total loss, but thankfully, the family was able to escape. Photo courtesy of City of Prescott.

RF athlete competes on 'American Ninja Warrior Jr.'

By Melissa Thorud

Unlike most River Falls High School students, Evan White participates in a unique sport that has allowed him to show his skills on a TV show, "American Ninja Warrior Junior." White was featured on season three of the show and competed with other athletes from across the nation.

"My favorite part is probably meeting so

many people and competing against some of my best friends," said White. "It was also really awesome to be able to hit a buzzer during the competition."

American Ninja Warrior features athletes who compete in the sport called Ninja Warrior Training. There are gyms across the United States that train in this obstacle course-style

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Evan White with the hosts of "America Ninja Warrior Junior," Matt Iseman and Akbar Gbaja-Biamila. Photo courtesy of Evan and Salena White



River Falls High School student Evan White at the "American Ninja Warrior Junior" competition. Photo courtesy of Evan and Salena White

Pandemic puts lack of broadband internet on the frontpage: How did we get here?

By Sarah Nigbor

Editor's note: This is the second in a five-part series highlighting the need for broadband internet expansion in Pierce County.

When the pandemic struck, town of River Falls residents John and Stephanie Stark didn't know what they were in for when he had to start working from home. Like countless people across the county, the lack of quality internet soon became all too apparent.

John Stark has several analogies to describe his internet experience, which he listed to the Pierce County Board in a letter.

"My connection is like a telephone party line - except there are always hundreds of

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people hanging on the line while I am using it. A fiber-optic internet connection is like a private line - it provides a dedicated connection just for you.

"My connection is like

being in the slow check-out lane at the grocery store, and when I use it to work from home, I am stuck in that slow lane ALL DAY LONG.

"My connection's speed of

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Don Dufek and Mellissa Deyo own and operate Barns of Lost Creek, a wedding venue in Beldenville. Internet accessibility is critical for a small business like theirs. Photo courtesy of Barns of Lost Creek Facebook page

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