

Rural Broadband is Critical Infrastructure for the 21st Century

The lack of fast and reliable rural broadband has far greater impacts than just the inconvenience and frustration caused by the constant buffering of your favourite YouTube videos. Having access to affordable high-speed broadband offers rural residents numerous community benefits such as greater accessibility to services for *all*, but in particular those residents with mobility issues; improved healthcare delivery; increased educational opportunities and perhaps the greatest benefits are with economic development. *Not only will existing businesses be enabled to thrive, there will virtually limitless new opportunities for businesses and individuals to create new products and services to offer to the world.* These new opportunities can generate valuable export revenues while having only a negligible environmental impact.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau stated during a campaign speech to the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) on June 5, 2015 that “*A Liberal government will also help municipalities fund investments to make better use of data and technology. In rural communities, we can — and should — aim much higher than the government’s current broadband access goals. And across Canada, improved wireless and digital technologies can make life easier — and businesses more productive. Municipalities cannot shoulder that burden alone. The federal government must be a strong partner as municipalities prepare for the future.*”

Prime Minister Trudeau is correct, the current definitions and goals are already past their '*best before date*'. In Canada, broadband is defined as a download speed of 5 Mbps, whereas last year in the U.S. the FCC changed its definition of broadband from 4 Mbps to 25 Mbps. Canada must also adopt at least 25 Mbps as the new standard definition of broadband internet service, but it should perhaps consider setting goals for even higher speeds so that we can sufficiently transform our digital economy and step out from under the massive economic shadow cast by the United States.

We must also look for new methodologies that approach the current broadband issues and funding solutions from a fundamentally different perspective. *It’s pointless to use the same old models where governments enter into secret agreements with private corporations giving them hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars with little or no accountability.*



***WARNING - You are now entering a rural broadband zone
Prepare for service outages, slower speeds and increased costs***

There are significant service gaps and servicing issues, but private businesses will not infill these gaps unless there is a compelling business case to do so. One of the most compelling cases is the presence of healthy competition, but this is sadly lacking in most rural regions across Canada. *The distribution of tax dollars to a very small number of corporations has not increased competition; it seems to have had the opposite effect where our tax dollars have actually helped to entrench monopolies.*

Broadband internet should be considered a utility as it is an essential service and regardless of whether the service is provided by a public or private utility provider, there needs to be well defined regulation to ensure that minimum basic standards are offered and more importantly that these standards are met.

In previous centuries, our governments invested in critical infrastructure such as roads and bridges to connect residents and facilitate trade. When they did this, they did not hand out millions of dollars to private companies for private gain. Instead, the governments of the day built the infrastructure and retained the assets for the continued benefit of the community that funded the construction. Retaining ownership gave the

communities control over the service offerings and service levels. The same applies with broadband internet, which is the critical infrastructure of the 21st Century. If you have control of the assets, you have control of the service levels.

“Broadband has the power to transform Rural Canada. Connectivity is now as important as roads and bridges to the sustainability of rural and remote communities, and to the success of rural institutions and organizations. The so-called ‘broadband gap’ remains a reality throughout Rural Canada, with lower average speeds compared to urban centres, and with limited connectivity in the most remote regions.”

- The role of connectivity in building vibrant communities report from FCM.

Rural communities across Canada have significant and ongoing issues with traditional infrastructure such as roads, bridges and sewer systems. These are issues that need to be addressed, but they should not consume so much municipal resources that strategic planning for the 21st Century is ignored. We must ensure that our leaders and decision makers educate themselves and are also motivated to play a strong leadership role in this area. If our politicians continue to underestimate the incredible community and economic value that true high-speed broadband connectivity offers, our rural communities will be left behind to collect digital dust.

I agree that we need the federal and provincial governments as strong partners, but our municipal governments must take a lead role to ensure that the rural residents have access to fast, reliable and affordable broadband internet services. We cannot afford to wait for broadband services to trickle outside of the currently well serviced urban areas. *If our rural communities are to remain economically viable in the 21st Century, we must become leaders instead of being content to follow and lose a generation of opportunities to our urban neighbours.*

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