

Northern Almaguin mayors readying to fight for internet service dollars

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Northern high-speed Internet is getting an infusion of federal funding but it remains a priority with area municipalities. Sept. 2019 - shutterstock photo

EAST FERRIS — Mayor Pauline Rochefort is the first to expound on the attributes offered in East Ferris, but high speed internet is not one of them.

Despite Astorville being home to one of the first internet towers built in the region, “the location is a prime example of why it's hard to get internet service here with the hills, rocks, and decentralization of population around the lake,” Rochefort said. “Those are examples of the difficulties we face.”

A recent survey done through Blue Sky Net, an internet network expansion facilitator in North Bay, indicated that East Ferris has the lowest percentage household access to affordable 5 MBP service at 36 per cent. Neighbouring Bonfield connectivity is at 46 per cent, Powassan at 54; and Callander at 65; while next door the City of North Bay had 100 per cent coverage.

"We had a business man move to East Ferris recently who had to put up his own tower because he works in high tech and couldn't get the service he needed. And he's not the first. Cartoonist Lynn Johnston (*For Better or For Worse*) put up her own tower in Corbeil because she needed a certain level of speed that could not be delivered," said Rochefort. "Those are examples of people who have had to go to extreme measures to get the service they require."

Rochefort has banded with other area mayors to make blanket high speed a priority.

"We decided to unite in raising the issue and in pursuing funding support for this region from both the federal and provincial government," she said. "We know there are funds that are going to be dedicated to improve broadband across Canada and we want to be on that list."

Earlier this month the federal government announced \$1.9 million in new funding for Blue Sky Net, \$1 million to support its ongoing operations for the next three years and \$890,000 for its Business Technology Improvement Fund.

"Internet connection is something that's very important to everybody and we want to make sure that rural Canadians have that connectivity, so that they can compete on a world level, by financing the operations of Blue Sky Net and allowing them to help companies and employers to expand, and expand through the internet," said Nipissing-Timiskaming MP Anthony Rota in making the Sept. 6 announcement.

"It helps everyone, it helps our economy get stronger, it helps us employ more people and it helps everything go ahead, so it helps the country."

Blue Sky Net is a not-for-profit corporation, funded through FedNor, that facilitates deployment of broadband technologies to over 150 communities in the districts of Nipissing, Parry Sound, Sudbury East and the township of Muskoka Lakes.

"This is not an issue an individual municipality can fight alone. We have to group together to make an impact," Rochefort said. "Blue Sky is an important partner for us to be successful. We need someone to represent us and that's Blue Sky."

"There are communities that have made direct investments themselves and put in their own fibre optic lines, but for a municipality like East Ferris that is very decentralized, that would be a very difficult project to undertake."

Earlier this year the Township of Nipissing donated land to an internet service provider in order to have a new tower built to increase that municipality's connectivity.

The mayors' group and Blue Sky Net have been working with Amedeo Bernardi Consulting Inc. which is organizing the first Canadian Rural and Remote Broadband Conference taking place in November in North Bay.

The conference will provide an information sharing forum for community leaders, rural advocates, service providers and government, bringing stakeholders together to share knowledge, experiences, lessons learned and advice focused on the challenges and realities of creating a sustainable digital economy for the area.

"I want this conference to set the tone for broader collaboration across all stakeholders," said Amedeo Bernardi, the conference organizer.

Bernardi has been focused on the needs for rural connectivity for many years and has worked with many internet providers including Bell Mobility, Ontera and Bruce Telecom.

Rocheffort says she and the other area municipal leaders are encouraged by the networking the conference promises to open to them, as well as a better understanding of how to work with the service providers and the government funders.

"We believe that in 2020 the programs for funding will be coming out," she said. "It's important that we make ourselves known and that our needs are front and center with those that are making decisions about that funding and where it will be spent."

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