

## **Lanark County delegation urges province improve high-speed Internet for rural Ontarians**

At the recent Association of Municipalities of Ontario Conference, Lanark County asked that future stimulus funding include, as eligible, projects that support high-speed Internet access and that the current system of access to utility poles in Ontario be modernized to make it easier to provide fibreoptic to rural Ontario.

The conference was held virtually this year, and Lanark County politicians and staff had an opportunity to appear as a delegation with Minister of Infrastructure Laurie Scott to discuss broadband access on Aug. 17. The delegation was led by Councillor Christa Lowry (Mississippi Mills Mayor) and supported by Warden Brian Campbell (Tay Valley Reeve) and County CAO Kurt Greaves.

Their presentation highlighted the importance of access to high-speed Internet during the COVID-19 crisis. “The pandemic has underscored the urban/rural digital divide,” Lowry said. “It is our hope, and that of many other rural municipalities, that investments in rural broadband are treated with the same urgency as public transit in urban areas.”

The delegation highlighted the growing global importance of a reliable online presence for economic growth. Students, more than ever, need access to reliable Internet, and with more people working at home due to COVID-19, businesses and employees need to be ready for this future norm. More government and health services are moving online.

“In order, for rural Ontario to be part of that future we need better access to high-speed Internet,” Campbell said.

Rural municipalities need commercial and residential development to pay for infrastructure, but this is stalled in areas of rural Ontario that do not have access to high-speed Internet. “There are enormous Economic Development possibilities in rural communities like Lanark County,” Greaves said. “We are quickly being left behind and we are not able to contribute to the provincial economy to our full potential.”

One of the key requirements is access to utility poles for fibreoptic cable. The delegation indicated there is currently a wait of up to a year for the utility to assess the pole line and determine costs, which slows down the process. As well, Internet Service Providers (ISP) must pay all of “make-ready” costs, (e.g. pole replacement and equipment updates), which can become prohibitive quite quickly. The poles and equipment were purchased by provincial ratepayers and most are on municipal rights-of-way with no rent paid to municipalities. The alternative to poles is plowing fibre lines into road shoulders, but it can be expensive and difficult or impossible given the abundance of rock.

“A system designed to enable faster access with a reasonable shared cost between the ISP and the utility would go a long way to quickly expanding fibreoptic Internet across rural Ontario,” Lowry said, adding, “Just about every residence in Ontario has utility pole service so, with easier access, high-

speed Internet will come to rural areas with much less government funding required.”

The delegation requested that all stimulus funding programs include high-speed Internet as an eligible category, and that utility pole access be modernized to make it faster with reasonable cost sharing between the utility and ISPs. They encouraged the province to start discussions with Hydro One to become partners in providing high-speed Internet to rural Ontario.

Providing reasonably priced access to utility poles would also help the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission to meet its target of 90% of Canadians having access to 50mbps download and 10mbps upload speed by the end of 2021.

“Reasonable ‘make-ready’ and rental utility rates would help expand the fibre network to rural Ontario and create a revenue stream that would help utility companies’ bottom line,” Campbell said. “Clearly this would create a win-win-win for ISP, utility pole owner and rural residents.”

Greaves said the delegation’s message was well received, and that Minister Scott indicated discussions have been taking place with the Minister of Energy as well.

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