

## **Staff Report 2020-0218**

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Meeting Date: June 30, 2020

Subject: Continuing Broadband Advocacy Approach

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### **RECOMMENDATION**

That staff be directed to initiate a broadband advocacy approach as outlined in Staff Report 2020-0218;

That the following initiatives be completed as part of the advocacy approach:

- a. submit a request to have a delegation meeting with the Provincial Minister of Infrastructure at the 2020 AMO Conference;
- b. request a meeting with the Federal Minister of Innovation, Science and Industry, and the Federal Minister of Rural Economic Development; and
- c. organize a petition attached as Schedule A to Staff Report 2020-0218 that once completed will be submitted to the MP and MPP representatives of Dufferin-Caledon.

That a copy of Staff Report 2020-0218 be provided to Dufferin-Caledon MP Kyle Seeback and Dufferin-Caledon MPP The Honourable Sylvia Jones for information.

### **REPORT HIGHLIGHTS**

- Rural areas of Caledon lack affordable and reliable internet access.
- Telecommunications is the jurisdiction of the federal government and utilities is the jurisdiction of the provincial government.
- Caledon Council identified “enhance high-speed internet connectivity” as a 2018-2022 work plan priority.
- The Town of Caledon has taken proactive measures including participating in the SWIFT initiative and undertook joint projects with Vianet to install over 8km of fibre through the Bolton commercial district and 35km of backbone fibre along the Caledon Trailway.
- The Town has advocated to the federal and provincial government to declare broadband essential and help facilitate access to existing underutilized or dark fibre optic infrastructure.
- On June 2, 2020, with funding from all three levels of government, over \$600,000 from Caledon investments and levy, SWIFT issued an RFP to address broadband service gaps in Caledon, which closed on June 12, 2020.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in many residents having to work from home, learn online and shop online, emphasizing the need for high-speed internet connectivity.

- Particularly as communities transition to COVID-19 recovery, and all levels of government consider the supports and measures required for a successful recovery, this provides a timely opportunity for the Town to reinforce its position with respect to broadband and increase advocacy efforts.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Background**

Broadband moves data including information, video, music, etc. The medium can be coaxial cable, optical fiber, radio or twisted pair. In the context of internet access, broadband is meant to mean any high-speed access that is always on.

While the more urban areas of Caledon have access to high-speed broadband, many settlements and rural environments in Caledon have poor to no services, as shown through the Internet Performance Map which can be found at <https://performance.cira.ca/caledon>.

Policies around telecommunications is the responsibility of the federal government. Managed by the Ministry of Innovation, Science & Economic Development (ISED), the Canadian Radio-television Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) regulates the telecommunications industry, such as Internet Service Providers (ISPs) through the *Telecommunications Act*. ISPs deliver internet services to homes and businesses and are responsible for the equipment they offer, billing and marketing practices, quality of service and customer relations. The Province plays a role through the regulation of utility corporations.

In 2016, CRTC declared broadband a vital and basic service. The CRTC established universal service objectives including that broadband (at minimum 50 megabits per second (mpbs) download / 10 mbps upload speed) should be available on fixed networks across all regions of the country. In 2018, the Minister of ISED, Hon. Navdeep Bains conducted consultations on revisions to the 3500 MHz band to accommodate flexible use and preliminary consultation on changes to the 3800 MHz Band. In terms of programs and funding, the Federal government has made investments such as the Connect to Innovate program and earlier this year, the Universal Broadband Fund.

In 2019, the province released a broadband and cellular action plan including funding, to expand broadband, digital services and cellular access in unserved and underserved areas.

The Town recognizes ISPs are not building internet infrastructure in parts of Caledon because it is extremely expensive to service rural residents that are unevenly distributed across Caledon. For most residents, however, broadband is seen as an essential service. Broadband internet is considered essential to everyday life – communication, economic growth, education, health care, agriculture, and public safety, among other areas.

## **Town of Caledon Position**

Broadband connectivity is both significant and complex, requiring significant investment and time from multiple parties involved.

In its 2018-2022 Work Plan, Caledon Council highlights the need to expand our high-speed internet infrastructure. The Town of Caledon recognizes the essential nature of broadband internet and has taken the position that the federal and provincial governments declare broadband as an essential service and partner with Caledon to facilitate the expansion of broadband to unserved / underserved residents. In addition, the Town calls on the provincial government to help facilitate telecommunication access to existing infrastructure including underutilized or dark fibre optic network and hydro poles.

There are telecommunication infrastructure networks that have already been built and could be better used to their full potential. Deeming broadband as an essential service will make it more feasible for additional and smaller internet service providers to access existing conduit and provide service to rural communities. In some municipalities, ISPs have experienced difficulty in routing fibre under rail. Furthermore, some utility corporations charge attachment rates and the cost of engineering studies to ISPs looking to access hydro poles and install fibre.

Federal and provincial support is needed as telecommunications and utilities are under the federal and provincial jurisdiction respectively. Telecommunication corporations could work collaboratively to access, route and share existing conduit. In the event of placing new conduit, telecommunication corporations could instead 'dig once', reducing overbuilding of fibre. Facilitating access of the fibre optic network and hydro poles could reduce the costs to ISPs, potentially creating a higher return on investment.

## **Town Action and Progress**

The Town has taken a more active role in broadband infrastructure to assist with connectivity needs of residents with the goal of realizing Town wide access to affordable, reliable high-speed internet for residents and businesses. The Town has strived to help reduce the initial investment for the providers to ensure that all residents have access to broadband.

In 2015, the Town joined the Southwestern Integrated Fibre Technology Inc. (SWIFT) initiative which will deliver scalable, future ready, fibre optic based network. In 2016, the Town established the broadband levy to facilitate the development and expansion of high-speed internet services in Caledon. In 2019, the Town announced a joint project with Vianet to install over 8km of fibre through the Bolton commercial district. The Town also partnered with the Canadian Internet Registry Authority (CIRA) to gather internet performance data and identify locations where internet is not available. In January 2020, Vianet and the Town announced the implementation of a 35km backbone fibre network to be installed in the Caledon Trailway.

Note, the Town has provided options to fill the gap temporarily, such as offering free wifi at Town facilities and expanding the Caledon Public Library's hot spot lending program.

Staff are continually monitoring provincial policy announcements and broadband related issues impacting Caledon.

Such actions at the municipal level have been in concert with the Town's advocacy. In the past few years, the Town has undertaken various lobbying efforts to communicate the Town's position by meeting with the Provincial Minister of Infrastructure at municipal conferences. During the most recent federal and provincial election cycles, the Town endorsed a set of priorities including broadband for the purposes of advocating for policy changes. The 2018 Provincial Election Town of Caledon Priorities, and the 2019 Federal Election Town of Caledon Priorities were circulated to all Dufferin-Caledon candidates, Party Leaders and Party Headquarters, the Region of Peel, and cities of Mississauga and Brampton. The documents were intended to educate local candidates on issues they can advocate for, if elected. In addition, note the Town provided comments to the Federal Government's consultation on bandwidth in 2018. In January 2020, the Town participated in the Ministry of ISED consultations to update the Universal Broadband Fund.

### **COVID-19 Pandemic**

The COVID-19 pandemic has emphasized the essential role broadband plays in terms of access to services and information, as well as the economy. As part of physical distancing restrictions, many residents are expected to work from home, participate in online learning and schooling, make purchases and order groceries online and other essential tasks. This has presented challenges for Caledon residents who do not have access to high-speed internet and for some has resulted in significant increase in data usage through telecommunication corporations.

In response, on April 7, 2020, Caledon Council requested telecommunication corporations cease over data usage charges including but not limited to all devices including rocket hubs and rocket sticks during the COVID-19 pandemic. The request was sent to the Prime Minister, Premier of Ontario, local federal and provincial representatives, Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) and the Region of Peel.

Furthermore, on April 14, 2020, Council adopted a resolution to lobby the Provincial Government to deem high-speed internet an essential service and to help facilitate access to existing underutilized fibre optic infrastructure.

Throughout May 2020, the Federal Minister of Rural Economic Development, Hon. Maryam Monsef acknowledged broadband as an essential service and that the idea of broadband becoming a public utility is an option being considered by the Federal Government. The Minister is currently managing the government's plan to help rural and remote communities access high-speed internet and is consulting with stakeholders on various options.

Moving ahead with the provincial plans to support broadband, on June 2, 2020, the Province of Ontario announced an RFP worth over \$5 million will result in a major improvement to Caledon's high-speed internet infrastructure. With funding from all three levels of government, \$600,000 from Caledon investments and levy, SWIFT issued an RFP to address broadband service gaps in Caledon, which closed on June 12, 2020.

On June 3, 2020, the Province also announced the Improving Connectivity in Ontario (ICON) program. Applicants, which includes municipalities can submit innovative proposals to improve connectivity in communities across Ontario, a portion of which will be funded by the Province. The Province also asked the Federal Government to take immediate action to improve internet connectivity for Ontario students. The Province is looking to connect high schools to broadband by September 2020 and elementary schools by September 2021.

While the federal and provincial governments have supported the Town's efforts through broadband funding, neither government has declared broadband as an essential service. High-speed internet will continue to be essential for Caledon businesses and the broader community. Lack of broadband access will impact the ability to create jobs in Caledon. Particularly as communities transition to COVID-19 recovery, and all levels of government consider the supports and measures required for a successful recovery, this provides a timely opportunity for the Town to reinforce its position with respect to broadband and increase advocacy efforts.

### **Broadband Advocacy Approach**

- **Continued promotion of Town's position with government representatives**

The 2020 AMO Conference is coming up in August, providing an opportunity to meet virtually with provincial government officials. The Town can continue its lobbying efforts and submit a delegation request by the June 30 deadline to meet with the Provincial Minister of Infrastructure. This option requires preparation of briefing materials and review of materials with the delegates.

Aside from the AMO Conference, a request could also be made immediately to meet with both the Federal Minister of Innovation, Science and Industry, Honourable Navdeep Bains and the Federal Minister of Rural Economic Development, Honourable Maryam Monsef. The Federal Government is consulting with stakeholders on options for rural broadband connectivity, and this would serve as an opportunity for the Town's position to be shared as part of the consultation efforts.

Similarly, the Eastern Ontario Regional Network has made several submissions advocating for CRTC to "Define high-speed/broadband Internet access as a basic service under the Telecommunications Act for both fixed and mobile broadband."

Since the Town's position seeks a policy change from the federal and provincial government who have the ability to make the change, this is crucial. The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing consultation by the Federal Government, provide a timely opportunity to influence policy makers with respect to broadband connectivity. Resources are available to pursue this option virtually. In addition, a written submission could be provided in advance.

- **Launch petition to mobilize support**

The Town can organize an online (with paper option) petition to the federal and provincial Dufferin-Caledon representatives to work with their respective governments in support of

the Town's existing position on broadband. The petition would be available for 90 days for signature by business owners and residents in support of the federal and provincial governments declaring broadband essential and facilitating ISPs access to conduit.

Broadband is a complex issue and a petition that provides the public with further information could help clarify any confusion around areas such as who is responsible for broadband connectivity, the broadband gap in Caledon and the technological challenges associated with solutions. The petition can be used to inform and educate others about broadband connectivity and the Town's proposed solution. A background document would be made available to provide more information. To enhance visibility of the petition, a communications strategy would be developed.

This option would engage the public, allowing them to participate in the Town's advocacy efforts. By targeting a broader public audience as opposed to solely government representatives, a petition would demonstrate to policy makers the level of public support for broadband connectivity and further support the Town's position when lobbying. Depending on the uptake of the petition and the communications reach, the petition could create support or like petitions from other municipalities, in which case the Town could work with municipalities to align messaging.

### **Next Steps**

Upon Council approval, staff will execute the Town's advocacy approach. Staff will submit a delegation request for the Mayor and members of Council to meet with the Provincial Minister of Infrastructure during the 2020 AMO Conference. In addition, a request will be submitted to meet with the Federal Minister of Innovation, Science and Industry, and the Federal Minister of Rural Economic Development. Staff will also post the petition, attached as Schedule A to Staff Report 2020-0218, on a petition website for signature.

As the Town's advocacy approach progresses, updates will be provided to Council.

### **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

There are no financial implications related to proposed advocacy approach.

### **COUNCIL WORK PLAN**

**Connected Community:** Enhance high-speed internet connectivity

### **ATTACHMENTS**

Schedule A: Petition – Broadband Connectivity