Municipal / Community Networks

A 2020 report published by the Edmonton Metropolitan Region Board estimated that improved broadband connectivity across the Edmonton region could increase its GDP by up to $1 billion — approximately a 1% increase — per year. It also argued that closing the connectivity divide would bring significant socioeconomic benefits in areas such as healthcare, education, skills, and general community wellbeing[36].

For many rural communities in Alberta, the internet gap has contributed to serious structural harms to social and economic resilience. Because of this, a number of communities have invested in municipally owned infrastructure for broadband delivery in Alberta.

For rural communities pursuing municipally owned infrastructure initiatives, access to high-speed internet is often cited as one of the most important factors in retaining the local business and population base. Caroline McAuley, Mayor of Vermilion, has said "the lack of broadband and connectivity levels have been a deterring factor for inquiring new businesses, despite all of the advantages we have[37]." The Town of Vermilion registered as an internet service provider with the CRTC in 2019, to test the feasibility of a community broadband project. This came after they failed to attract investment from incumbent providers.

Alanna Hnatiw, Mayor of Sturgeon County (another rural municipality testing a community broadband initiative), testified before the Standing Committee on Finance that "not only does the lack of internet service drive workers and employers to cities, thereby reducing productivity in rural areas, but improved rural internet service can play an integral role in Alberta's economic recovery[38]."

Several municipal governments and local economic development authorities in Alberta are either actively exploring community broadband options, or undertaking broadband projects that follow several different models, including leveraging existing unused infrastructure for broadband. The City of Calgary, for example, has made its dark fibre available for lease[39], and the Lethbridge Electric Utility has provided dark fibre services to public oriented organizations within the City of Lethbridge[40].

In early 2016, the Alberta Ministry of Economic Development and Trade, in conjunction with University of Alberta professors Dr. Michael McNally and Dr. Rob McMahon, conducted eight consultations with Regional Economic Development Authorities (REDA) across the province on the topic of network infrastructure. Using the information they gathered, they spearheaded the creation of the Understanding Community Broadband: The Alberta Broadband Toolkit[41]. This guide is available to assist local governments in determining what solution might best fit their need for improved broadband services for residents and businesses.

Olds

Waterton

Parkland

Clearwater County

Other Initiatives

Internet Service Provider Wi-Fi Hotspots

Municipally driven Wi-Fi Hotspots

Retail Wi-Fi

Provincial and National Parks

References

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