

Key players willing to serve rural King with broadband Internet service

By Mark Pavilons

Rural King residents desperately want to be connected to the rest of the world.

All the major players have an eye on this municipality, and are willing to fill in the gaps in terms of broadband Internet services. It will just take time.

A packed house of residents greeted host King-Vaughan MP Deb Schulte and some major Internet service providers (ISP) during a public session on the issue last week. From all levels of government to the major providers, there's a willingness and desire to move full steam ahead. What's lacking is funding and a recognition that King is underserved.

Schulte pointed out this was the number one issue in 2015 when she was knocking on doors across King, and it remains a top concern today. A significant amount of work has taken place in the last couple of years and it remains a priority for King councillors.

Improving and expanding connectivity to our rural communities in King Township is a long-standing, high priority. We are continuously working with our upper levels of government, telecommunications and internet service providers to fill the underserved gaps of our community of communities. Access to affordable and reliable high speed internet is becoming an essential service and King Township will continue to collaborate with others to ensure our residents and businesses have improved access to a digital services that enable and empower them to thrive grow learn and stay healthy, said Mayor Steve Pellegrini.

The momentum is building, but Schulte said she's well aware of residents' frustration.

She considers access to high-speed internet an essential service and she's fighting for the municipality.

Schulte pointed out this past spring, Rural Economic Development Minister Bernadette Jordan, announced \$2 billion in federal funding for Internet access in Udora and the Chippewas of Georgina Island First Nations in York.

In 2017, the feds committed \$825,000 towards King's fibre optic expansion in partnership with Vianet and the Province.

Ottawa's 2019 budget committed up to \$1.7 billion over 13 years, starting in 2019-20, to establish a new national high-speed Internet program, the Universal Broadband Fund. The government also announced its commitment to set a national target, in which 95 per cent of Canadian homes and businesses will have access to internet speeds of at least 50/10 mbps by 2026 and 100 per cent by 2030, no matter where they are located in the country.

I know how important broadband is to this community, Schulte said. I'm fighting hard for any available funding.

Mayor Pellegrini noted Schulte has been working hard on King's behalf. He pointed out the municipality is not an ISP but they are working with everyone to lay the groundwork.

Governments are concentrating on underserved areas of the country. King, despite it's rural isolation, is not considered underserved, largely due to its vicinity to large urban centres. That's the catch-22 where funding is concerned. Schulte said she's working on changing the criteria, to allow King to be eligible for more funding.

Laura Bradley, with YorkNet said this corporation owned by York Region is concentrating on dark fibre, reaching areas that are off the grid. They work with providers and municipalities to make sure total connectivity is achieved.

Brian McCullagh, director of business development at Vianet, said they're building the backbone of the trunk line. They managed to connect a hundreds of King homes, maximizing the number of homes for the money they received. That, he said, enabled us to get the fibre that much closer to your street.

They have another shovel-ready project pending funding. The ultimate goal is to bring fibre to every King home. McCullagh praised the local representation, from Mayor Pellegrini to Schulte, noting everyone has a stake in the game. It does take time and money, he pointed out.

John Armstrong, director of municipal and utility relations at Rogers Cable, said the challenge in King is what he's calling a perfect storm of flawed government policy.

Rogers is evaluating its rural broadband policy, and Armstrong urged residents in King to lobby for more access.

Richard Grisdale, senior manager with Bell Canada, said they've done some recent infrastructure work in King and they're also intent on bringing fibre to every home. He pointed out Canada has surpassed the U.S. in terms of saturation, at roughly 35% of homes.

There are noticeable gaps in service and the providers are always looking for partnerships to fill the need. Being flexible, creative and fostering good dialogue will help everyone reach the goals.

Bell is reaching many King homes with their fibre to the premises (FTTP) service. They're also upgrading their local towers to improve mobility coverage.

Xplornet, serving upwards of 380,000 rural homes, is the only rural internet service, according to Steve Van Groningen. In 2018, they doubled their capacity and this year, they are 5G ready. They serve rural customers where the wires end, he said, adding they're investing a lot in the future. By 2020, they will offer 100 mbps and unlimited data. Xplornet has secured capacity on the Jupiter 3 satellite, which will launch in 2021.

In recent years, the government has focussed on urban areas, making it difficult for wireless providers to serve areas like King, he said. Hopes are the government will make the spectrum more widely available and that, he said, is an important piece to the puzzle.

Schulte said there are many options available to residents today, and she's helping to bring money to the table. The community, she urged, should gather together and seek out partners.