

York plans to boost local Internet services through federal program

By Mark Pavilons

York Region is taking the lead on trying to secure federal funding to boost internet services in rural areas like King Township. York's Committee of the Whole last week approved a staff report to seek federal funding through the government's Connect to Innovate Program. The plan in York is to expand the broadband network in King, Georgina, East Gwillimbury and Whitchurch-Stouffville through a massive, 175-kilometre network.

Both York and its rural member municipalities have pegged broadband as a key priority. York wants to be a 'Gigabit Region,' where an innovative collaboration results in a connected lifestyle community. This means 'raising the bar where there is underservice' and staying ahead of the curve.

King was well represented at the committee meeting, with councillors, staff and a representative of the King Chamber of Commerce all in attendance.

Mayor Steve Pellegrini told his regional colleagues just how important this is to King. He pointed out Internet is a needed service, not unlike roads. The CRTC has declared Internet access an essential service.

'This is the foundation for having high-speed (Internet) everywhere,' the mayor pointed out.

'Connect to Innovation is so important to King,' said Councillor Dave Boyd. He admitted there are a number of gaps in and around King, particularly in the outskirts of Nobleton and throughout Laskay. Staff have gathered data to present to regional staff.

In February, York regional councillors met with federal government officials to articulate York's infrastructure priorities, which include expanding the broadband network. The presentation focused on the opportunity to expand this network to facilitate economic development across York, especially in more rural communities.

In January, it was announced that King will receive \$1.6 million in a joint federal, provincial and private partnership for fibre optic broadband expansion. Communications company Vianet, who will be responsible for providing the service to residents, will contribute the remainder of the project costs.

In June 2016, York council agreed that broadband was considered infrastructure that should be considered for both federal and provincial funding support and Regional staff would make applications.

In December of 2016, the Ministry of Innovation, Science and Economic Development announced the Connect to Innovate program, which plans to invest \$500 million by 2021, to bring high-speed Internet to rural and remote communities. The program anticipates direct public sector and municipal involvement.

York staff noted Connect to Innovate will fund up to 75% of the cost of providing 'last mile connections' to customers. The program also requires extended services must connect to institutions like municipal offices, libraries, schools, hospitals, etc. The program also extends eligibility to rural areas if underservice can be proven. Every application to the fund must have a network of public/private partnerships.

King Township created 'King Connects,' to solicit public input and map where Internet services are lacking or non-existent. This data will help shore up York's application in the future.

York is well positioned to make an application, and has full support from its rural municipalities.

A proposed fiber loop in King means connecting Nobleton and Schomberg to the existing telecom network in King City. The King portion is roughly 38 kilometres, with a cost of \$2.88 million.

The proposed route is designed to maximize internet access to Regional and municipal infrastructure and facilities.

'It will also put thousands of existing and future households within 2 kilometres of the optical fibre backbone; placing them within reach of Internet service providers that leverage the network to deliver broadband services,' the staff report noted. 'Improved high-speed service to rural residents has the additional benefit of supporting the many home-based businesses in these areas.'

The existing York Telecom Network is a natural vehicle for leveraging federal funding.

The total estimated cost to build the three proposed routes (175 kilometres) in York is roughly \$14 million, and an estimated \$8 million can be recovered from Ottawa. That leaves York on the hook for the remaining \$5.6 million.

At this time, York has not earmarked the funds and will have to identify potential funding sources. Staff hopes to bring these details forward as part of the 2018 budget process.

Mayor Pellegrini said it's spread out over three years, so it shouldn't be a problem for York to find the \$2 million per year.

The staff report and recommendations will go to regional council for final approval.