

Lecce, Scott call on Ottawa to improve internet

By Mark Pavilons

A move by two high-profile MPPs is putting pressure on Ottawa to up the ante in improving internet access in the province. King-Vaughan MPP and Education Minister Stephen Lecce, and Minister of Infrastructure Laurie Scott sent a letter to federal ministers Sunday, calling for further collaboration on broadband between the Province and Ottawa. The MPPs point out the future success of Ontario's students, and ultimately the prosperity of Ontario's economy, depends on achieving the required internet connectivity in all areas of the province. "We are calling for your immediate, urgent support to increase and expedite federal funding to address the current need and lack of access to broadband. As the provincial response to the COVID-19 outbreak continues, people across Ontario are relying on access to the internet to maintain normalcy, including learning and working from home, ordering household essentials and connecting with friends and family. Lecce and Scott pointed out that over the next months and years, internet access will also be central to the recovery and growth of our economy. We are advocating for immediate action to improve internet connectivity and broadband access for students across Ontario. Lecce said affordable, dependable and secure internet service is the backbone of the Ontario Ministry of Education's Learn at Home strategy which focuses on enabling the province's close to 2,000,000 students' access to online learning materials and tools to continue their learning journey from home. The CRTC has declared that every Canadian should have an internet connection with access to broadband speeds of at least 50 Mbps download and 10 Mbps upload and access to unlimited data. 1 While most residents in Ontario have access to the internet, the speed, quality, and cost vary significantly across the province. There are coverage gaps in rural and northern communities, as well as some urban areas. King Mayor Steve Pellegrini said the federal government declared high speed an essential service. "I have been working diligently with both levels of government and also the private sector providers to improve the internet coverage in King. Pellegrini is now the vice-chair of YorkNet, a York Region group whose mandate is to ensure connectivity of regional departments to make service delivery more efficient. They hope to help provide dark fiber to municipalities, universities, schools and hospitals in the region. YorkNET is working with Vianet and hopes to explore collaborate projects with Bell and Rogers. The mayor pointed out there are 3,700 homes that qualify for Bell Gigabit Fibe in King. They are working to construct another 1,300 homes this year alone. Vianet is working with YorkNet in a joint use agreement to utilize the Region's dark fibre. The mayor said he's been working directly with MP Deb Schulte with regards to federal funding in the riding and the region. Improving broadband access in rural King has long been a priority of local councillors. The issue was brought to the forefront last summer, when MP Schulte hosted an information night, bringing all the major providers together. "Our government has always recognized that fast, reliable and affordable high-speed internet is a necessity, not a luxury, for all Canadians, including those living in rural and remote communities," she said in response to Lecce's letter. "Our investments will connect approximately one million households to internet. Coupled with public and private partnerships, more than \$6 billion of investments are on the table, with the ambitious target of connecting all Canadian households to the internet by 2030. For families who are struggling to afford access to home Internet, the Connecting Families initiative is helping bridge the digital divide by helping them access high speed internet service packages for \$10 per month from participating service providers. This initiative is helping connect hundreds of thousands of Canadians to the Internet, while also distributing 50,000 computers to eligible households. We welcome the province's shared commitment to connecting Ontarians. Combined federal and provincial investments will get our students, rural residents and others the connectivity they need sooner. Existing internet connectivity gaps prevent many elementary and secondary students from accessing the same learning made available to all other Ontario students, affecting education equity. The lack of reliable broadband internet in particular in rural and regional areas will widen gaps in these students' abilities to succeed in school, and to gain the skills and knowledge they need to reach their full potential. With our emphasis in preparing students for the jobs of the future, it is critical that the federal government accelerate funding and work to support affordable, high-speed connections to households in Ontario. Technological fluency is an asset that all Ontario students deserve to have," Lecce said. The Ministry of Education, in collaboration with school boards and the telecommunications sector, is delivering internet to all schools in Ontario, with all high schools having access to broadband by September 2020, and all elementary schools will have this capacity in place by September 2021. As of March 31, 2020, broadband modernization is complete at 1,983 schools, including 403 northern schools, and in progress at 2,954 schools, including 99 northern schools. In May, through Ontario Together, the province released several initiatives to support low cost

internet connectivity and access to learning devices such as computers, tablets, and portable Wi-Fi hotspots to support Ontario's Learn at Home Strategy. Canada's future competitiveness depends on our nation's ability to transform and embrace the digital landscape. We believe Canada and Ontario's future workforce and prosperity depends on this technological shift, to enable access to the digital economy and to ensure our young people have the skills and competencies needed in the global market, Lecce added. Broadband is a federally regulated sector and the MPPs are asking the federal government to provide leadership and fully fund broadband to support students, parents and teachers across Ontario. The Government of Ontario is committed to addressing these gaps to ensure that all Ontarians have access to affordable and quality broadband internet connectivity. To support this commitment, Queen's Park has earmarked \$315 million over five years to expand broadband and cellular infrastructure in those unserved and underserved areas, including \$150 million program expected to launch this summer.