

Ontario's new Broadband program will better connect residents & businesses to high-speed internet

By Mark Pavilons

Hot on the heels of a plea by Ontario MPPs asking Ottawa to boost broadband internet, the provincial government announced additional funding. Queen's Park last week announced an investment of \$150 million to address much needed broadband infrastructure across unserved and underserved regions of the province. This investment looks to connect more residents and businesses across the province, including in King and Vaughan, to reliable high-speed broadband and cellular service. The Improving Connectivity in Ontario, or ICON, has the potential to leverage up to \$500 million in total partner funding, including from the telecommunications sector. "I have heard from many residents who have long raised concern with limited access to cellular and broadband connectivity," said King-Vaughan MPP Stephen Lecce. "I am proud to see our government announcing this significant investment to bring the people of King-Vaughan one step closer to more reliable connectivity. It's 2020. We need to bring an end to the digital divide and get our community online." Once the ICON program opens its initial application intake later this month, applicants - telecom companies, municipal governments, Indigenous communities and non-profits - will be invited to submit innovative proposals to lend their investment, expertise and experience to improve connectivity in communities across Ontario. The province will fund a portion of each approved project. "Now more than ever before, our government recognizes that the people of Ontario need to be connected to learn, work, and run their businesses. This program is an important step toward bridging the digital divide," said Infrastructure Minister Laurie Scott. The Improving Connectivity in Ontario program is part of Up to Speed: Ontario's Broadband and Cellular Action Plan, which includes \$315-million to improve and expand cellular service and broadband in rural and remote communities across Ontario. In the span of a year, Ontario has advanced initiatives to improve access to broadband and cellular service across eastern, western and northern Ontario. All of these initiatives are expected to generate more than \$1 billion in investments over five years. As much as 12 per cent of households in Ontario - mostly in rural, remote or northern areas - are underserved or unserved, according to the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission. In the past several months, Ontario has partnered with the Eastern Ontario Regional Network (EORN) to leverage \$213 million to improve access to cellular and mobile broadband in eastern Ontario. The Province is investing in the \$190 million Southwestern Integrated Fibre Technology (SWIFT) project to bring high-speed broadband to 50,000 more homes and businesses across Southwestern Ontario. Recently, SWIFT Inc. awarded contracts to bring high-speed internet to thousands of homes and businesses in Lambton, Wellington and Norfolk counties. More contracts are expected to be awarded for additional counties across southwestern Ontario. Ontario has invested in initiatives to improve connectivity in northern Ontario, such as a project that will connect five remote Matawa-member First Nation communities, and investments in broadband projects through the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation and the Next Generation Network Program.