

Province takes next step to expand high-speed internet access

The Ontario government is taking the next step to help bring high-speed internet access to every community by the end of 2025. Today, the province launched a Request for Qualifications (RFQ) as part of a new competitive bidding process to connect more than 300,000 homes and businesses in unserved and underserved areas. Under the new and innovative procurement process, qualified internet service providers (ISP) will later bid through a series of reverse auctions in defined geographic areas for opportunities to provide connectivity across Ontario. "Our government is bringing access to high-speed internet to every home and business across Ontario," said Kinga Surma, Minister of Infrastructure. "By taking this next step, we are closer to ensuring that no one is left behind when it comes to participating in this digital world. We're saying that no matter where you live, you will have access to reliable, high-speed internet to work, learn, start a business, access vital services like health care, and connect with family and friends." The new procurement process, led by Infrastructure Ontario, builds on the province's recently announced investment of up to \$14.7 million for 13 new projects under its Improving Connectivity for Ontario (ICON) program. This investment is providing up to 17,000 homes and businesses with access to reliable high-speed internet.

It also builds on a range of other previously announced provincial initiatives that will connect another 70,000 homes and businesses throughout Southwestern and Northern Ontario. "Infrastructure Ontario is excited to be launching this innovative new competitive bidding process," said Michael Lindsay, President and CEO of Infrastructure Ontario. "These past 18 months of working, learning and receiving care from home have shown the value and importance of achieving high-speed connectivity for every region in Ontario. This program will help more than 300,000 homes and businesses across the province gain access to this connectivity." Ontario is now one of the few jurisdictions in Canada with its own comprehensive and proactive plan to achieve 100 per cent connectivity. In the coming months, the government plans to announce the results of the reverse auctions, along with additional details on how it will help ensure every region in Ontario has access to high-speed internet by the end of 2025. In March, the Ontario government announced nearly \$4 billion to connect every region to high-speed internet by the end of 2025. This is the largest single investment in high-speed internet, in any province, by any government in Canadian history. Internet service providers interested in bidding on these contracts must register with www.merx.com to download the RFQ. Infrastructure Ontario will review the RFQ submissions and those shortlisted will be invited to respond to a Request for Proposals to participate in the reverse auctions. The reverse auctions allow internet service providers to bid on how much provincial funding they would require to supply the community with high-speed internet access. The winning bid would meet defined coverage and deployment requirements at the most competitive (lowest) price. As many as 700,000 households in Ontario – making up 1.4 million Ontarians – lack access to high-speed internet or have no internet connection at all. Up to Speed: Ontario's Broadband and Cellular Action Plan is already providing internet and cellular access to homes and businesses in communities across Ontario. The Ontario government is also helping to speed up construction of broadband projects by successfully introducing the Supporting Broadband and Infrastructure Expansion Act, 2021 earlier this spring. Last year, the province launched the Improving Connectivity for Ontario (ICON) program, a multi-year program that aims to support high-speed internet and cellular projects. The province has invested in initiatives to improve connectivity across Eastern and Southwestern Ontario. It has also invested in high-speed internet projects in rural and Northern communities through other initiatives, such as the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation and the Next Generation Network Program. Expanding access to high-speed internet is part of Ontario Onwards: Ontario's COVID-19 Action Plan for a People-Focused Government, which includes more than 30 projects that are changing the way people and businesses interact with government.