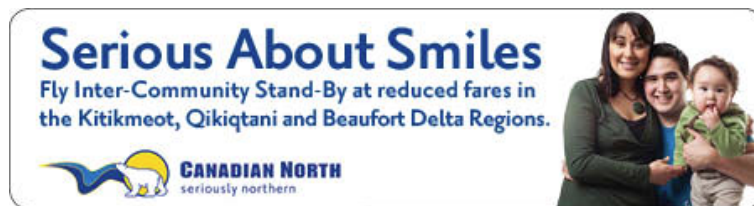


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SSI Micro rallies customer support

Calls for customer intervention following NorthwesTel appeal of backbone connectivity pricing order

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SSI Micro customer Doug Prichard has a nephew in India, a niece in Australia, and friends and family in Ontario. He would like to video conference with them but can't, because it eats up too much bandwidth, he said.

The Yellowknife photographer said things he could probably afford with NorthwesTel, such as online video tutorials for the software he buys, or a subscription to video streaming service Netflix, he can't with SSI Micro, for the same reason.

Last month, Prichard and his wife, who have been "satisfied customers" of SSI Micro since taking up residence in Yellowknife more than eight years ago, began considering switching to NorthwesTel after having to buy an additional 12 gigabytes of bandwidth. For the same price they could have purchased 70 gig from NorthwesTel.

"The present practises, I feel, rob me of choice as a consumer," Prichard said, referring to the rates that NorthwesTel -- the owner of all fibre and microwave connectivity to the south -- charges competing Internet service providers for its wholesale Internet transport network, or "backbone" service.

"The only thing that seems to be preventing SSI from competing is NorthwesTel providing them the backbone," Prichard said. "And that rather puts my back up against the people that are doing that."

Prichard is among the SSI Micro customers who are writing letters to the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) against NorthwesTel, following a recent appeal by the telecommunications giant of an order last month to publish the rates charged to wholesale competitors for use of its V-Connect fibre-optic Internet connection to the south.

Instead of providing the CRTC with rates and a cost study for the service, NorthwesTel created a brand new Internet transport service it says will provide the connectivity between Yellowknife and Edmonton competitors want.

"The proposed new service was not asked for by SSI and is not useful to SSI," stated Dean Proctor, SSI Micro's chief development officer, in a recent letter to customers. "Rather, it appears to be another attempt by NorthwesTel to further delay and even eliminate effective competition in the North."



Yellowknife photographer David Prichard is among the customers appealing to the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) on behalf of SSI Micro Ltd. The Internet service provider is accusing NorthwesTel Inc. of stalling orders to provide cost studies for its wholesale Internet transport service. - Thandiwe Vela/NNSL photo



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Backbone rates proposed by NorthwesTel are up to 3,000 per cent, or 30-times higher, than rates for similar services in the south, Proctor said, adding the wholesale rates are even many times higher than the retail rates NorthwesTel charges its own Internet customers.

Robert Crouch, director of Yellowknife-based Internet service provider Tamarack Computers Ltd., which has had a long-standing arrangement with SSI Micro to share costs on a wholesale connection through NorthwesTel, agreed. He said the price the company pays, even sharing some of the access fees, makes the cost to use the wholesale service nearly equivalent to what it would cost to replace their wholesale service with a single home NorthwesTel Cable Internet package, even paying the incredible amount of overage charges the company would rack up to serve its clients.

"Under those conditions, how are we expected to compete with them on the basis of price?" Crouch asked in an e-mail to Yellowknifer.

NorthwesTel's appeal has been received and is currently being reviewed by the CRTC.

Customers and other interveners can file comments until Thursday.



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