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SSi Micro lands web bid

Critics say expected Internet speeds still poor compared to southern options

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Northern News Services
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NUNAVUT

Northern telecom service provider SSi Micro will receive \$35 million to double the speed and data cap of satellite Internet service in Nunavut as part of a federal government initiative.

But the Nunavut Broadband Development Corporation said the project's required minimum speeds of three mbps for downloads and 512 kbps for uploads in the territory is much less than what's available in most southern communities.

"Overall, it's just underwhelming," executive director Oana Spinu told Nunavut News/North. "This is a small increase that will make little difference for Nunavut Internet users as we watch the gap between the North and the rest of Canada get bigger and bigger and bigger."

The move is part of a \$305-million program called Connecting Canadians aimed at bringing high-speed Internet services to households in rural and remote regions of the country.

As the result of a funding announcement by the Government of Canada, SSi Micro is slated to receive \$35 million to extend and enhance satellite Internet



SSi Micro dishes and tower in Cambridge Bay. The federal government recently announced the company will receive \$35 million for improving Internet services in Nunavut. - photo courtesy of SSI Micro

service for approximately 8,600 homes in Nunavut. The company was declared the winner of a request for proposals and will need to contribute \$15 million as part of the project. SSi also said that money will be applied to new hardware and facilities to upgrade infrastructure in all 25 Nunavut communities.

The money from the federal government will be applied to satellite capacity for the territory's Qiniq network through satellite service provider Telesat.

Spinu said that in 2011 when the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission first proposed a target of five megabytes per second as a target across Canada, the average download speed in the country was 9.43 megabytes per second and the average amount downloaded per month was 22 gigabytes. In Nunavut that same year, the average speed was 384 kilobytes per second and the data cap was three gigabytes per month.

By that same index, today the average download speed in the country is around 30 megabytes per second and the average amount downloaded per month was 70 gigabytes with the average cost of Internet being \$30 a month. By comparison, the current standard plan available to customers of Qiniq in all 25 communities in the territory costs \$80 per month, with a monthly usage cap of 10 gigabytes, and a speed of 1.5 megabits per second.

"The gap has more than doubled from 2011 to 2015," Spinu said. "I'm really hopeful this is a patch while a short-term plan is being developed but this very incremental increase will make very little difference to Nunavut Internet users."

While SSi spokesperson Dean Proctor acknowledged the service being given to Nunavummiut would be nowhere near the speeds found in Toronto, he did say the initiative was a stepping stone to bringing those speeds in place.

With this additional \$15 million investment under the Connecting Canadians initiative, the speed and data cap of Qiniq's standard plan is set to increase to three megabits per second and 20 gigabytes, but stay at the same price of \$80 per month.

Proctor said this will be a "massive improvement" for satellite-served communities, calling his services "world-class" and high-quality. In a media release, the company said that it is already deploying 4G LTE technologies into communities in the territory.

However, when asked about how this faster technology would affect consumers' consumption of the new data cap of 20 gigabytes, Proctor admitted the speed of three megabytes per second would help "pace capacity."

Spinu said there have been debates over what qualifies as high-speed and acknowledged there wasn't a set definition like there has been for dial-up Internet. But she had strong words for the new minimums set for the territory.

"To me it doesn't matter what you call it, it's just not good enough," she said.

The data may also become a major issue for users in the territory because

according to Spinu's calculations, someone in Nunavut could easily consume their entire bandwidth amount in as little as 15 hours.

There's also the very real danger that as a result of the program, said Spinu, Internet speeds in Nunavut will plateau at three megabytes per second starting in 2016.

"The rest of Canada's speeds will get faster and fast each month, each year," she said. "You can't wait four years to see an increase in service if everyone else has it happens at a much faster pace."

For Spinu, one of the biggest issues of limited and slow access to Internet is its impact on education, job training and entrepreneurship.

"So many of the jobs today and tomorrow are going to require a minimum level of digital literacy," she said. "If you don't have Internet access at school or at home, how are you possibly going to have those skills to be able to compete in the workforce or even to run your own business?"



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