

Internet file sharing, conferencing tools launched

New programs latest outgrowth of bandwidth increases in Nunavut

Guy Quenneville

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IQALUIT - With the help of the territory's parliamentary rep, the Nunavut Broadband Development Corporation (NBDC) officially launched two new file-sharing programs aimed at its Qiniq network subscribers at the 19th annual Nunavut Trade Show in Iqaluit last week.

In a press conference held Wednesday, Nunavut MP Leona Aglukkaq was piped in via a live satellite feed using NBDC's new audio-video conferencing tool, Meet Online.

On a flat screen TV perched on the conference table, Aglukkaq, seated in an Ottawa meeting room with a Canadian flag flanking her left side, joined NBDC's chair, Darrell Ohokannoak, and SSI Micro president and CEO Jeff Phillip, in the first public demonstration of Meet Online.

The group was also on hand to answer questions about QFile, a streamlined platform for delivering large files to and from Nunavut communities, where a limited amount of bandwidth has traditionally caused slow service and regular outages for Qiniq users.

Qfile and Meet Online were co-financed by NBDC and the feds to the tune of \$15.6 million.

In addition, NBDC, with financial aid totalling \$21.6 million from the Government of Canada, has been adding to the territory's bandwidth capacity since 2005, when the Qiniq Internet system was launched.

"I remember when speeds at home were interminably slow. With dial-up, a page would take forever to load -- and that was just text. I'm not even talking about pictures," said Bob Long, Nunavut's deputy minister of economic development and transportation.

"For Northern communities, broadband services are not just a nice-to-have; they are a fundamental requirement," said Aglukkaq. "Staying connected to the world means easier banking, better health care and strong bonds with family members living in different parts of Canada."

Qiniq users and subscribers to Northwestel Internet services previously could use free programs similar to Meet Online such as Skype -- but with mixed results. Meet Online benefits from having servers installed in individual communities, which means users are not competing for bandwidth with the greater world.

It's also faster and doesn't use up as much bandwidth capacity, an important consideration in Nunavut, where Qiniq -- which costs \$60 a month for most users -- is supposed to be an affordable option for Internet surfers.

Compared to Skype, "The big benefit to Meet Online is... from a cost perspective, you're only using half the satellite bandwidth," said Phillip.

Future funding

With Nunavut's broadband capacity now expanded and Meet Online and Qfile up and running, the NBDC is faced with its next obstacle: making sure it can keep the system funded to avoid charging higher user fees in the future.

"By June 30th, 2012, the funding for bandwidth support will be finished," said Ohokannoak, who could not help periodically peering into the TV to watch Aglukkaq.

"The federal fund that supports infrastructure investment will have run its course. There eventually be more money for infrastructure, I have no doubt. But broadband has to be a high priority right there with housing, water and sewer, roads and airports. If the investment in satellite bandwidth is not there, prices in Nunavut could double or triple, making it unaffordable for the average consumer."

The Qiniq network, which currently supports 4,500 users, will grow its customer list to 6,800 in the next two years, said Phillip.

Initial reactions to Wednesday's demonstration were highly positive among those who attended.

"I think it was awesome. We can watch what's going on in Ottawa," said Pat Netser of Iqaluit.

"This is exactly the type of technology that will make massive strides in e-learning and distance education," said Neil Burgess, a consultant with several clients in Nunavut. "It also means that people working at a mine can continue in their learning and progress from positions of labour to positions of greater responsibility and ability to make more money."



Darrell Ohokannoak, chair of the Nunavut Broadband Development Corporation (NBDC), peers at the flatscreen TV projecting a live satellite feed of Nunavut MP Leona Aglukkaq during a demonstration of Meet Online, a new audio-video conferencing tool offered by the NBDC, at last week's Nunavut Trade Show. - Guy Quenneville/NNSL photo