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NUNATSIAQ NEWS

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OPINION 13 AUGUST 2020 - 8:45 AM EDT

Canada's post-pandemic spending should give a boost to northern internet connectivity

"Solutions ... need to be led by northerners, with capacity development and ownership opportunities for Inuit and Nunavummiut generally"



Satellite dishes near the beach in Pangnirtung. Nunavut Senator Dennis Patterson says that federal investments in northern

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internet initiatives should prioritize “any initiative in the North that is led by Arctic residents, with particular consideration given to any project that provides learning and own-source revenue generation opportunities to Indigenous people.” (File photo)

By Dennis Patterson

Anyone who's ever built something knows that it's much easier when you know what the finished product should look like; it helps with design choices along the way and makes it easier to identify and fix any mistakes.

As in many other countries, COVID-19 has hit the reset button on Canada's economy, giving us an opportunity to strategically invest in projects and sectors that will help us once again thrive in a post-pandemic world.

However, northern investments to date seem to be ad hoc and devoid of any larger strategy. Take, for example, internet and broadband.

Nunavut, with its reliance on satellite internet, is subject to a phenomenon called “rain fade.” If it's too rainy or foggy in Saskatchewan (where the signal goes up to the satellites) or in Nunavut (where the signal comes down), the entire territory can be without proper internet. This is particularly troublesome during a pandemic that forces many of us to work or learn from home, or for those who rely on technology to stay in touch with loved ones as we practise social distancing. It also affects—among other things—our ability to carry out the day-to-day work of government, communicate in times of emergencies, and administer justice in cases where individuals are appearing via video conference.

Solutions to broadband issues—like solutions to several other pressing concerns such as overcrowded housing and a lack of mental health and addictions support—need to be led by northerners, with capacity development and



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ownership opportunities for Inuit and Nunavummiut generally.

When I chaired the Special Senate Committee on the Arctic, our report Northern Lights: A Wake-Up Call for the Future of Canada highlighted one key theme:

“decisions about the North must be made in the North, for the North and by the North.”



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With all this in mind, I was taken by a current submission made to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance by a group of Inuit and northern business people and leaders called the PanArctic Communications Consortium. Their pre-budget submission is entitled “Enabling an Inuit-led Telecommunications Solution for Canada’s Arctic.”

This submission highlights previous government initiatives aimed at shrinking the north/south telecommunications divide that, in practice, resulted in \$49.9 million being awarded to telecommunications company BCE Inc. (also known as “Bell”) and its wholly owned subsidiary Northwestel Inc. through its Connect to Innovate (CTI) program. This massive contribution of public funds has enabled Bell/Northwestel to essentially corner the market. The submission notes that “despite

A blue advertisement for medical consultation. It features a white stethoscope icon and a heart symbol. The text reads: "Need a medical consultation? Don't wait." Below this, it says "Québec.ca/coronavirus" and "1 877 644-4545". The logo for "Vosre gouvernement Québec" is at the bottom.

An advertisement for "The ABCs of going back to school safely". It shows a group of children with their hands raised. The text says "The ABCs of going back to school safely" and "See the FAQs Quebec.ca/back-to-school". The "Vosre gouvernement Québec" logo is at the bottom.

A job advertisement for a Radiology Technologist. It features the Nunavut logo and the text: "DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN RESOURCES", "Radiology Technologist", "DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH", "RANKIN INLET, NU". It also says "Continued..." at the bottom.

An advertisement for a Managing Editor position at Nunatsiaq News. It features a "NOW HIRING" badge and the text: "Managing Editor", "This position is based in Ottawa or Iqaluit. Closing September 14, 2020.", and the Nunatsiaq News logo.

An advertisement for "Élections Québec" recruiting for "Québec's Democracy". It features the text: "Élections Québec", "RECRUITING FOR QUÉBEC'S DEMOCRACY!", and "Élections Québec is seeking returning officers to organize and oversee provincial elections in various electoral divisions across Québec." It also includes a section for "INTERESTED IN THIS CHALLENGE?" and "YOU HAVE UNTIL SEPTEMBER 17 AT 4:30 PM TO APPLY."

ISED's [Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada's] stated commitment to open access to CTI-funded facilities, Bell has offered inadequate (and often unusable) wholesale access to its subsidized T19 satellite backbone capacity." In plain terms—it has killed competition in this market.

The submission goes on to point out that the CRTC's Broadband Fund is "insufficiently capitalized to resolve the digital divide" and that the Universal Broadband Fund announced in 2019 has yet to be implemented.

The pitch: an Inuit-led solution that would see Nunavut's largest Inuit birthright development corporation, the Qikiqtaaluk Corp., and a northern-based telecommunications company, SSi Canada, build on existing infrastructure to build a "high-capacity satellite and fibre backbone infrastructure across the Arctic." This would provide "fair and open access" but would also be a project driven, built and owned by Inuit.

This isn't the only active project proposal that is Inuit-led. The Kivalliq Hydro-Fibre Link is being championed by the Kivalliq Inuit Association. The KIA has lined up partners such as Anbaric, and signed an MOU with the Canada Infrastructure Bank for a full feasibility study.

Adamee Itorcheak, an Inuk who has played a pioneering role in telecommunications throughout the North for over 20 years, sits as president of Ivaluk Fibre and has been pushing hard for his project that would bring fibre to communities throughout Nunavut and Nunavik.





While government must do its due diligence, priority should be given to any initiative in the North that is led by Arctic residents, with particular consideration given to any project that provides learning and own-source revenue generation opportunities to Indigenous people.

Competition is important in any sector, but Indigenous capacity development and ownership opportunities are key in any northern endeavour. If we are to successfully empower Nunavummiut, and most especially Inuit, to rebuild and grow their economy in the post-COVID world, Canada needs to invest in big-picture solutions that northerners bring to them. It's their home, so why should we not follow their vision?

Dennis Patterson is the senator of Nunavut.

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Posted by Inooya on 15 August, 2020