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Faster Internet promised

Federal government pledges \$305 million to increase download speeds in Northern and rural communities

Daron Letts

Northern News Services

Published Friday, February 14, 2014

NWT/NUNAVUT

"Those who want to see the future of this country should look North," Prime Minister Stephen Harper told Canadians during his annual Northern tour in August 2012.

That may be, but Northerners and Northern businesses connecting online with the south are fettered by long lag times and high bandwidth costs, limiting their ability to keep pace with much of the rest of North America and with each other, an economic handicap underlined by the CRTC's 2013 Communications Monitoring Report.

This should change in the near future, according to last week's federal budget.

The Feb. 11 budget pledged \$305 million over five years to "extend and enhance broadband internet service for Canadians in rural and Northern communities." The funding commitment advances a promise made during the government's 2013 speech from the throne.

This "interim step" is a welcome move to Dean Proctor, chief development officer for Yellowknife-based SSI Micro, which supplies broadband Internet access to Nunavut and much of the NWT through its Qiniq, Airware and Skyline brands.

"This is very, very good news," he said. "It's a constant battle to address the cost of backbone into the satellite transport and Northwestel's fibre transport in and out of the communities. There's a need to address on a long-term basis that cost of backbone to deliver better and more affordable broadband, not only for consumers, but also for government and for business."

The \$305 million is intended to bring Northern Internet speeds up to five megabits per second per user in outlying communities, as stated in the budget document.

Compare that to 2012, when fewer than half of Northerners had access to that download speed, at very high cost and, last year, when none of the communities with the fastest Internet speeds were served by satellite, according to the CRTC.

In southern Canada, 94 per cent of Internet users had access to download speeds in excess of five megabits per second last year. As far back as 2011, the average residential download speed in southern regions was 11.5 megabits per second. The average is now above 12 megabits per second, according to Proctor.

In the budget, the federal government stated that details of its plan to improve Northern Internet access will be revealed "in coming months."



SSI Micro's satellite dishes in the NWT, such as this one in Fort Simpson, are aimed at the Anik-F3 satellite in orbit above the equator. The federal government plans to reveal details of a program to improve Internet access in Northern communities in coming months. - photo courtesy of SSI Micro

"We understand from the government that over the coming weeks and months, and hopefully it will be weeks, the details in terms of how these investments will be made in broadband in the North will be worked out," Proctor said.

"All that being said, when you look at comparable service in the south, which is something the NWT government in particular wants to see every household receive, there's still more work to be done."

SSI Micro delivers broadband Internet access to approximately 50 Northern communities, representing all 25 communities in Nunavut and most NWT communities. The company is also contracted by the Nunavut Government to bring wide area network data services to Nunavut communities.



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