



CORPORATE REPORT

To: Electoral Area Services Committee

Date: 2020-05-12

From: Robin Beukens, Planner II

File No: 5500-01

Subject: Rural Broadband Connectivity Strategy

INTENT

This report is intended to provide the Electoral Area Services Committee with an overview of the Rural Broadband Connectivity Strategy project for the FVRD electoral areas that TANEx Engineering is developing on behalf of the Fraser Valley Regional District. Staff is not looking for a recommendation and has forwarded this information should members want more clarification to discuss the item further.

STRATEGIC AREA(S) OF FOCUS

Foster a Strong & Diverse Economy

Support Healthy & Sustainable Community

BACKGROUND

The Rural Broadband Connectivity Strategy was initiated to assess current conditions and provide a strategy to improve high-speed broadband internet (50 Mbps download /10 mbps upload) access for increasing business potential in rural areas, educational opportunities, healthcare, public safety, emergency management, and for meeting the personal needs of residents. TANEx Engineering presented to EASC in December 2019 and staff commenced work on the project in January. Since the project began the importance of the Strategy has increased, as the COVID-19 pandemic has made it apparent that having access to high speed internet in rural areas is a necessity and not a luxury.

Many residents are now working from home, schools and universities have switched to online learning, and people are attending meetings and appointments, including medical consults, remotely. Without high speed broadband many of these activities are impossible or limited. The vast majority of rural residents have less access to these options due to poor or unavailable broadband access. Having a connectivity plan for the FVRD's electoral areas will provide a basis for discussions with service providers, support FVRD broadband advocacy efforts, facilitate discussions with potential partners and put the region in a position to respond to future funding opportunities, which often require supporting technical information.

DISCUSSION

Federal and Provincial Governments

High-speed broadband connectivity is an issue in rural areas throughout Canada. To address this challenge, the Federal Government has developed “High-Speed Access For All: Canada’s Connectivity Strategy”. This strategy establishes the goal of providing all residents of Canada with access to high-speed internet. The Strategy was developed by the Ministry of Rural Economic Development and included up to \$6 billion in investments to improve connectivity for Canadians in the 2019 Federal Budget.

The Province of BC produced the BC Connectivity Report in 2019. In Canada as a whole 85% of households have access to 50+ Mbps, in BC 93% of households have access. Rural areas throughout Canada, including BC, have significantly less access. The report notes that only 35% of BC’s rural Indigenous communities and 33% of rural non-Indigenous communities have access to high-speed broadband internet.

FVRD Rural Broadband Connectivity Strategy

The FVRD Rural Broadband Connectivity Strategy will align with these federal and provincial initiatives, providing a local assessment of current conditions and create a strategy for improving broadband connectivity in the FVRD electoral areas. While the strategy is focused on broadband connectivity rather than cellphone coverage, establishing broadband infrastructure can assist in delivering increased cellphone coverage.

As noted while the project began for different purposes, the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the importance of the project and pandemic response and recovery will be a key feature. With social distancing requiring people to stay home, many people now work, learn, run errands, and socialize online. Lack of sufficient internet can inhibit the resiliency of the economy, prevent students from fully engaging at school, and leave people feeling isolated.

The Strategy will also highlight the unique characteristics of the FVRD and build upon some recently completed work related to expanding the clean economy in the region. Extending broadband will facilitate the development of clean economy initiatives in the electoral areas, including the development of the agritech sector. In many of the municipalities and electoral areas, agriculture is a large portion of the local economy. In 2015 the FVRD generated 39% of total provincial gross farm receipts, the highest proportion of any regional district in BC. Providing broadband access to the agricultural sector can continue to encourage the development and adoption of agricultural technology, leading to increased efficiency and productivity. Non-agriculture businesses will also benefit from more robust broadband access.

As part of the project, the following will be completed:

- Assess and document the current state of connectivity in the electoral areas in the FVRD. Member municipalities are not part of the scope.

- Identify current service providers and their offerings.
- Prepare a gap analysis between the current state and where the FVRD wants to be from a connectivity perspective.
- Articulate the need for broadband and the benefits to the region.
- Provide a summary of connectivity technologies and their respective advantages and disadvantages.
- Provide recommendations for the short, medium and long term.
- Identify high level costs estimates for capital and operational costs broken down by electoral area.
- Identify potential projects to be considered by the FVRD.
- Assess cellular service coverage in the FVRD. The strategy does not include improvement of cellular service coverage.

Indigenous Communities

Many rural Indigenous communities throughout the FVRD are facing similar connectivity issues to non-Indigenous rural communities. In the BC Connectivity Report, digital connectivity is noted to be an important step towards reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. Engagement with Indigenous communities on broadband connectivity will occur, although the COVID-19 situation will make this a challenge at least in the short term. As broadband infrastructure is extended as a network, it may be prudent for rural Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities in the FVRD to partner on projects for mutual benefit.

Engagement

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 Pandemic, engagement will be online. Staff and the consultant will interview each Electoral Area Director on the connectivity concerns in their area and receive input on the most effect ways to engage their respective electoral areas during the COVID-19 pandemic. Engagement will include questions about how residents have been affected by the pandemic in terms of internet connectivity.

Workplan

A work schedule is included as Appendix 1.

The initial phase of the project will focus on information gathering – collecting mapping data, reviewing existing plans and bylaws, engaging with service providers on levels of service. During and after the information gathering and assessment phase, staff will commence with engagement. The Strategy is expected to be completed by the early fall of 2020.

Funding

As of the 2019 Federal Budget, \$6 billion dollars have been allocated to improving broadband connectivity in rural areas throughout Canada. There are indications from the Federal Government that there could be sizable amounts of infrastructure stimulus funding post-pandemic. Some of these funds

could be directed towards rural connectivity initiatives in order to enhance the future resiliency of rural communities.

COST

Funding for the strategy will be allocated from appropriate Electoral Area budgets for a total cost not exceeding \$49,515. Unless otherwise notified of an alternative funding source by an electoral area Director, funds will be allocated out of the individual electoral area Community Works Funds as per 2016 census population distribution.

CONCLUSION

The final Strategy report will include an assessment of current conditions, rationale for improved broadband connectivity, and short, medium, and long term recommendations for improving connectivity in the electoral areas of the FVRD. The FVRD will use this information to apply for funding to improve rural broadband connectivity as opportunities arise.

COMMENTS BY:

Alison Stewart, Manager of Strategic Planning: Reviewed and supported

Stacey Barker, Director of Regional Services: Reviewed and supported.

Kristy Hodson, Acting Director of Financial Services: Reviewed and supported.

Jennifer Kinneman, Chief Administrative Officer: Reviewed and supported.