

CONTEXT

Recognizing the increasing importance of capable broadband networks, the Central Alberta Economic Partnership (CAEP) together with the Battle River Alliance for Economic Development (BRAED), completed initial studies focused on identifying municipal and regional broadband opportunities and options in 2017. In that study, Flagstaff County, Hardisty, Killam, Sedgewick, Forestburg, and Heisler all identified community broadband as key to addressing the needs of their respective communities. All were very interested in partnering in order to see full-scale community broadband deployment within the next 5 years.

According to the followup 2018 roundtable discussions, participants almost unanimously agreed that although some of their communities have good Internet service, the region, as a whole, is falling behind. Indeed, the minimal 50 Mb/s downstream by 10 Mb/s upstream CRTC basic (residential) Internet service objectives are not met anywhere in the FIPC region. The group feels a real urgency to move a broadband strategy forward as quickly as possible and believe that regional partnerships are the best way to do this.

A followup BRAED/CAEP study recently provided communities interested in moving forward with a more indepth review of the available options. Seven studies were completed and the one prepared for the Flagstaff Intermunicipal Partnership Committee is available here:

https://www.dropbox.com/s/x361g1zn3xm8xm8/FIPC_Final_190308.pdf?dl=0

BRAED/CAEP REPORT FOR THE FIPC REGION

While a variety of options are available to the FIPC region, the report recommends the development of regional utility in which broadband connectivity is made available on a wholesale, open-access basis for all service providers to use to deliver enhanced service-sets to residential and commercial premises throughout the region. Indeed, Internet services up to 40 Gb/s would be supported.

Two approaches are outlined:

- Deploy a backbone route to connect the eight FIPC communities as well as County facilities, hamlets, and fixed wireless ISP towers that are in need of additional backhaul capacity. This would reduce the backhaul connection fees in each of a population centres and improve services in the truly rural areas.
- Deploy access networks in each of the region's eight towns and villages.

Though the backbone deployment does not have a positive payback, fibre deployments within the eight community members do. In fact, if the network were to be deployed in the communities, the operation would likely go cashflow positive within three to five years, depending on how it was financed. Operations could be outsourced and management issues amongst the members would be minimal.

RECOMMENDATION

In light of the critical importance of capable broadband services to the future of the FIPC region, we recommend that the FIPC move to have a broadband Business Case developed. Whereas the above results are based on typical figures of merit and default business, financial, and operational assumptions, the Business Case would complete conceptual level designs for each community to refine the capital estimates and work with the FIPC to align the business, financial, and operational options with the longer term vision of the FIPC. The FIPC would then have solid numbers on which to develop a longer term broadband strategy.