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, the Paintearth communities noted that speed and reliability on the available wireless networks were lacking and continued to be a challenge. Indeed, the minimal 50 Mb/s downstream by 10 Mb/s upstream CRTC basic (residential) Internet service objectives are not met anywhere in the PEPS region. Given financial and other challenges, the communities were very interested in partnering with neighbourng communities in order to pool resources and resolve the issues on a regional basis.

According to the followup 2018 roundtable discussions, there was a here was a clear understanding and consensus that the lack of broadband availability in the area is and will continue to be an impediment to keeping young community members in the area. Several participants stated that basic access to online education courses is unavailable and there is little alternative but to move to where it is available. There is also a general sense that businesses are very unlikely to move to the region due to lack of broadband when neighboring regions already offer it.

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 Paintearth Economic Partnership Society is availble here:

https://www.dropbox.com/s/ffkuuqj8fdpbk09/PEPS_Final_190308.pdf?dl=0

BRAED/CAEP REPORT FOR THE PEPS REGION

While a variety of options are available to the PEPS 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 three PEPS 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 two towns and one village.

Though the backbone deployment does not have a positive payback, fibre deployments within the three 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 PEPS region, we recommend that PEPS 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 PEPS to align the business, financial, and operational options with the longer term vision of the PEP Society. PEPS would then have solid numbers on which to develop a longer term broaband strategy.