



External Briefing Note

GEORGINA

Subject: Broadband Strategy and Action Plan

To: Mayor and Council

From: Shawn Nastke, Head, Corporate Service Delivery Excellence

Date: October 2, 2019

Briefing: Development of Georgina's Broadband Strategy and Action Plan

Developing a Broadband Strategy is an action in the 2019-2023 Corporate Strategic Plan

A priority in the 2019 -2023 Corporate Strategic Plan is to grow the Town's economy. A key approach identified to advance this priority is improving broadband connectivity. In this regard, the plan calls for the development of a Broadband Strategy to consider the various options available and define the optimal path forward for Georgina. Pending budget approval, the development of the Broadband Strategy and Action Plan is scheduled for completion in 2020.

All business sectors – including agriculture – require fast and affordable internet connectivity

Access to affordable high-speed internet connectivity is critical to most businesses regardless of whether they are located in an urban or rural area. Business relies on broadband for numerous elements such as:

- communicating with suppliers
- seamless and reliable access to cloud services (e.g., accounting, banking, CRM, etc.)
- increasing productivity and efficiency
- communicating with and expanding customer base
- driving innovation/modernization, etc..

The provision of high-speed internet connectivity is as important as transportation networks – and for many business sectors - more crucial. The retention and attraction of residents and talent can also come into play with access to high-speed connectivity now being viewed as the fourth utility and a factor in deciding where to live. In this regard, communities that do not offer high-speed affordable internet connectivity could risk placing the local economy and residents at a disadvantage.

Numerous studies confirm that high-speed affordable internet connectivity can have a significant impact on local economies

A growing body of research establishes a clear relationship between the provision of high-speed affordable internet connectivity and economic growth – in both urban and rural communities. The literature also suggests that

communities lacking adequate broadband infrastructure are routinely eliminated as potential locations by corporate site selectors. Promoting high-speed affordable connectivity throughout Georgina will strengthen the Town's ability to attract and retain business/talent and enhance an already strong value proposition anchored by our location on the south shore of Lake Simcoe, Highway 404 connection, affordable housing, a small community feel and a growing commercial service base.

A 2017 speed test survey identifies underserved areas across Georgina

The Economic Development and Tourism division conducted a speed test survey in 2017 to support York Region's funding application to the federal Connect to Innovate grant program. The results of the survey identified underserved areas across the Town. Based in part on this survey, Town Council approved a staff recommendation on April 5, 2017 (Report No. DS-2017-038) to allocate \$90,000 toward the Region's Connect to Innovate funding application. The request was for the federal government to match the \$90,000 to support upgrades to the Town's South Shore Community Broadband (SSCB) wireless network to service "certain households and businesses in those areas identified as partially serviced based on the survey completed." With the focus of the funding stream being fibre optic infrastructure, Georgina did not receive any matching funding dedicated to improving the SSCB wireless network. The Region however was awarded \$2M in funding to install 'backhaul' fibre optic infrastructure across Georgina and to Georgina Island. As part of the 2020 budget process, staff will be requesting the \$90,000 continue to be set aside for broadband with its specific use determined through the strategy and action plan initiative.

Many municipalities are taking a proactive approach to enhancing broadband connectivity

Acutely aware that fast and affordable internet connectivity is a critical component of a community's infrastructure, jurisdictions across North America (and the world) are taking a proactive approach to ensuring its availability. It's no longer a "nice to have" in the global economy. The roles that municipalities are playing vary widely from incenting the private sector to enhance connectivity, to installing fibre optic conduit to providing internet service itself. Georgina has already taken proactive steps in the provision of broadband. In 2013, it assumed ownership of the South Shore Community Broadband (SSCB) wireless network. However, as the network only serves a very small percentage of households and businesses in Georgina, it does not represent a comprehensive strategy and action plan on its own.

A Broadband Strategy and Action Plan will serve to help leverage the Town's assets and opportunities

The Town is well positioned to enhance broadband connectivity given the following assets and opportunities:

- YorkNet will be installing 100km+ of publically owned fibre across the community over the next several years;
- The Town owns a wireless broadband infrastructure network (South Shore Community Broadband);
- The Town is serviced by both, major internet providers as well as smaller providers;
- The Town's efforts are strongly supported by York Region and YorkNet; and,
- More grant funding may be available in the future.

Developing a strategy and action plan will serve to identify how to best leverage the above assets and opportunities and allow Council to clearly define the Town's vision and role for moving forward.

Staff to recommend through 2020 budget submission that \$75K be set aside for a Broadband Strategy and Action Plan

Staff will be putting forward a capital business case as part of the 2020 budget recommending Council set aside \$75K for the development of a broadband strategy and action plan. Approval to use the \$75K would be subject to Council's approval of a proposed scope of work for the initiative. In this regard, approval of the business case would only serve to earmark the funds with a subsequent approval required.

Significant pre-work planned for fall 2019

The topic of broadband is complex and ever evolving (e.g., introduction of 5G). This complexity is magnified by the fact that the Town owns its own wireless infrastructure network. To better position the Town for moving forward, a significant amount of pre-work has been planned for fall 2019. This work will serve a dual purpose:

- to assist Council in deciding on the focus and scope of the Broadband Strategy and Action Plan in 2020, and
- to develop and compile necessary information so the Town is prepared for future funding opportunities

The fall 2019 workplan includes:

- An online resident/business survey regarding internet speed, pricing and overall concerns
- A workshop with the business community to explore connectivity and pricing concerns
- An analysis of the South Shore Community Broadband wireless network
- Discussions with Internet Service Providers in collaboration with YorkNet to explore ideas for enhancing connectivity
- One-on-ones and a workshop with Council to establish a connectivity vision for Georgina (e.g. fibre enabled community), a set of principles regarding the Town's role in the provision of broadband, and, the scope and direction of the Broadband Strategy and Action Plan.

Staff will be seeking the assistance of an external industry expert to lead the Council one-on-ones and workshop and assist with the other components. The expert will be funded through the 2019 operating budget.

Charting a clear course of action will improve chances of success

There are numerous directions the Town can take to enhance broadband connectivity. The right path for Georgina is best identified through a process of information gathering and analysis, public engagement, considering all key variables/options and Council discussion and debate. Given that providing access to high-speed affordable internet connectivity is a key ingredient to achieving the Town's economic development goals, the investment in the creation and implementation of a broadband strategy and action plan will help to ensure Georgina has a clear roadmap for success.