

Project Update: 2018

Background:

SouthWestern Integrated Fibre Technology Inc. (SWIFT) is a not-for-profit, collective broadband initiative that is funding the construction of an affordable, open-access, ultra-high-speed fibre-optic regional broadband network for everyone in Southwestern Ontario, Caledon and the Niagara Region. To overcome our region's broadband infrastructure gaps, SWIFT has developed a long-term plan to help more than 3.5 million Ontarians, or 25% of Ontario's population, to connect and keep pace in a changing digital world. The project is leveraging \$180 million in combined investments by the federal and provincial governments and over \$17 million in investments by municipalities across the region. The project was initiated by the combined connectivity interests of all 15 members of the Western Ontario Wardens' Caucus (WOWC). This includes Brant, Bruce, Chatham-Kent, Elgin, Dufferin, Essex, Grey, Huron, Lambton, Middlesex, Norfolk, Oxford, Perth, Simcoe, and Wellington County. In addition, Barrie, Caledon, Mulmer, Orillia, Windsor and the Niagara and Waterloo Regions are also supporting the project. Non-municipal members include Beausoleil First Nation, Connecting Windsor-Essex (CW-E), Chatham Kent Georgian College, Grey Bruce Health Services, InterMarket Inc., Chatham-Kent Lambton Administrators Group (CKLAG), Niagara CIO Consortium (NCC), Saugeen First Nation, Simcoe County Access Network (SCAN), Six Nations of the Grand River, and the Stratford Economic Enterprise Development Corporation.

Issue:

In today's digital world, a fast, reliable internet connection serves as more than just a convenience. Broadband connectivity is an essential piece of community infrastructure that is necessary to enhance economic and social development, modernize and streamline the delivery of health and social services, and increase capacity to administer and govern institutions. Investing in the expansion and enhancement of affordable, open-access, ultra-high-speed fibre optic Internet access in Ontario's rural and remote communities will help to ensure that everyone has equal access to opportunity. In many of Ontario's rural and remote communities, there are significant up-front costs associated with building and expanding broadband infrastructure. Telecom Service Providers (TSPs) are reluctant to extend service into these areas as they cannot generate a large enough return on investment. As a result, much of rural Ontario's current internet infrastructure networks are sparse and use outdated technology. This severely limits the capabilities of the network and what service providers can offer consumers. Businesses and farms located in these unsupported areas of Ontario are limited by the technology they can use, isolated from their potential customer base, unable to finish projects in a timely manner, and unaware of the government programs that have been established to help support them. Unemployed and underemployed individuals are unable to access relevant employment opportunities and, unable to participate in virtual training sessions that are required for obtaining high-quality, well-paying jobs. Rural youth are forced to leave their homes to complete daily homework assignments and obligated to travel long distances to access higher education. Seniors have limited access to the healthcare providers and social services they require to enable them to age in place.

Current status:

- May 2017: Launched a two-stage Request for Pre-qualification (RFPQ) to identify qualified TSPs, specific service gaps across the region, and priority areas for eligible SWIFT investments
- July 2017: Released final list of 28 pre-qualified TSPs (www.swiftnetwork.ca/procurement).
- January 2018: Released first in a series of RFPs for first phase of network construction

Next steps:

- Q1, Q2 2018: Continue to consult with municipal partners to identify where fibre will be built
- Mid 2018: Close RFP and begin construction
- Ongoing: Continue membership drive

The infrastructure will be built, owned and maintained by TSPs. The location and amount of fibre-optic infrastructure built in each community will be determined by the final overall design of the project, as informed by the RFPQ process. Once the network is operational, SWIFT will collect a small residual from the successful TSPs. The residuals will be allocated to a Broadband Development Fund (BDF), along with sponsorship funds, more upper level government funding and membership fees. Every SWIFT network user will effectively result in increased contributions to the BDF which will accelerate broadband connections across the region and ensure that SWIFT becomes self sustainable. The board will also use the BDF to continue to build out more infrastructure until *#broadbandforeveryone* becomes a reality.

Conclusion:

By building a high speed, fibre optic Internet infrastructure, SWIFT will ensure that every member community benefits from a faster, more reliable, more affordable, and completely future-proofed Internet infrastructure. Through this project, SWIFT will enhance economic and social development, modernize and streamline the delivery of health and social services, and increase capacity to administer and govern institutions. Members receive benefits of SWIFT's significant procurement expertise, including aggregated demand, negotiated rates, and support in preparing RFPs for broadband services. SWIFT is helping our region compete, connect and, keep pace in a changing digital world by developing a membership based, long-term infrastructure plan. As a buying group, SWIFT will ensure greater competition between TSPs which will lead to more choices and, better services at lower prices in all member communities.

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