

TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL

'You are put at a disadvantage:' MP calls for better rural internet access



Kings County politicians are calling on their respective levels of government to increase access to high speed internet for their rural constituents as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to force more people to work and learn from home.

Fundy Royal MP Rob Moore submitted an open letter to Minister for Women and Gender Equality and Rural Economic Development Maryam Monsef last week, calling on the federal government to move faster on its efforts to improve access to high-speed internet in rural areas.

"It comes down to competitiveness, both for individuals and for businesses," said Moore.

"If you do not have access to high-speed internet ... you are put at a disadvantage."

In a statement provided to the Kings County Record by Monsef's spokesperson Alex Howell, attention was drawn to several previous projects aimed at increasing access to high speed internet in rural Canadian communities, including the Investing in Canada Infrastructure Plan. That plan looks to invest \$40 million to connect approximately 83,000 rural households and businesses, while Connect to Innovate, which will be investing a further \$1.1 million to connect 12 communities.

"Without a doubt, this is a difficult time for all Canadians," wrote Howell. "Even before the COVID-19 crisis began, our government recognized that fast, reliable and affordable high-speed internet is a necessity, not a luxury, for all Canadians, including those living in rural and remote communities."

Despite those initiatives, Moore said more needs to be done, based on how often his constituents raise the issue.

The COVID-19 pandemic has only made the issue more important, said Moore, as many residents in both urban centres and rural communities are being forced to work and learn remotely - a task that is virtually impossible without fast internet, he said.

"The way many people work is going to be different moving forward," he said. "I had never done a Zoom call in my life until COVID, and now we do them virtually every day. That's not an option for everybody in Fundy Royal."

Hampton MLA Gary Crossman said he has been working with Moore on this issue and has also been in regular contact with constituents facing the same problems around access to high speed internet.

Earlier in June, Crossman submitted a petition to the New Brunswick legislature on behalf of his constituents to bring more attention to the issue at the provincial level, though he feels it is ultimately more of a federal, rather than provincial, responsibility.

"In one week alone, there were well over 600 people who signed that petition," said Crossman, who said his office only prepared and delivered the petition, but did not solicit signatures.

"There is a real need for [access to high speed internet] especially with school starting up again in the fall."

Howell said more investments will be coming.

"We will soon launch the new \$1 billion Universal Broadband Fund, which will build on the investments being made through Connect to Innovate and support whatever network infrastructure is needed to best meet rural and remote connectivity needs, including fibre, fixed wireless, and satellite technologies depending on the region," Howell wrote.

"Like our previous programs, the Universal Broadband Fund will be open to any applicant who can deliver a viable project, including small ISPs, municipalities, and Indigenous groups. While precise timelines are being worked out, we recognize the urgency."

Given the stakes will only get higher as the world settles in to a 'new normal' of long-term remote working and learning during the COVID-19 era, Moore said he hopes increased action will come sooner, rather than later.

"If nothing changes, kids are going to miss out on learning opportunities, and people that are trying to engage in the workforce are going to be limited compared to their co-workers," said Moore.