Broadband and Connectivity

Providing broadband and cell phone service to rural Alberta is key for attracting investment, maintaining local businesses, and allowing all Albertans to participate in the digital economy. Providing these services in rural and remote areas requires innovative strategies and partnerships, and rural municipalities strive to make their communities great places to live and invest.

What is the RMA's position on the importance of broadband in rural municipalities?

- Broadband internet is vital for rural businesses and residents to engage in the digital economy.
- Broadband internet is essential to rural community-building, as well as attracting qualified professionals and industry to rural and remote areas.
- Many rural and remote areas do not have the population density to attract broadband services based on a business case. Therefore, it may be necessary for municipalities to partner with federal and provincial government agencies and industry groups to ensure their residents' needs are met.

What financial considerations do rural municipalities have with respect to the provision of broadband?

- Rural areas with low population density and remote communities will likely not receive broadband service from market forces alone.
- Rural municipalities with the capacity to deploy broadband should be eligible for broadband funding programs.
- Access to broadband in rural communities must be affordable for customers.
- To support transparency in actual levels of connectivity available in rural areas, internet service providers should be required to include additional data for their advertised services, including speeds at peak times and reliability metrics.

What collaborative relationships are essential to developing quality rural broadband?

- Federal and provincial funding programs should allow for rural municipalities to be partners in constructing broadband infrastructure and providing broadband service.
- Many community services, including broadband, require collaboration among the Government of Alberta, the local municipality, and one or more non-profit organizations. It is critical that all organizations involved in the delivery of community services have a shared voice as to how the service is delivered within the community.
- Municipalities work with internet service providers (ISPs) to support rural broadband service development (e.g. purchasing infrastructure and allowing ISPs to service these facilities to facilitate broadband distribution to low population density areas, partnering with an ISP to share the cost of building infrastructure).

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How does the work of the RMA support the sustainability of rural broadband?

- Through advocacy efforts, the RMA works to increase awareness and support the sustainability of broadband services (e.g. engaging with Alberta Technology and Innovation and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities on broadband policy issues).
- The RMA champions the rural municipal perspective on broadband services through submissions to the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) and Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada (ISED).
- RMA ran an internet speed testing project for two years which demonstrated that less than 10% of tests run meet the Government of Canada's goal for internet speeds.
- While RMA advocates for increased funding for and access to high-speed broadband in rural municipalities, RMA is neutral about the form of technology utilized to provide broadband services; numerous options exist to access high-speed broadband (e.g., fibre, satellite) and one form of technology may be better suited to local circumstances and geography, and is in turn more sustainable for that municipality than other forms of technology.

What current broadband and connectivity related issues are impacting rural Alberta?

Minimum Broadband Speeds

- The Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission's (CRTC) declaration of broadband as a basic telecommunication service, and decision to increase the minimum connectivity speed threshold for an area to be considered "serviced" by broadband are both positive steps towards a consistent level of broadband service across Canada.
- While 50/10 Megabits per second (Mbps) broadband speeds are a minimum acceptable service level for rural municipal broadband services, not all parts of Alberta – let alone Canada – have access to such speeds. Therefore, funding programs designed to increase broadband speeds should not be allocated to communities who already have 50/10 Mbps speeds until a 50/10 speed is achieved in all communities in Alberta and in Canada from coast to coast to coast.
- Any funding programs developed by the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) related to improving service in underserved areas must focus on isolated rural and remote areas with the poorest connectivity speeds, and not allow funding recipients to only target areas that are slightly below the minimum threshold.

Alberta Broadband Strategy and Fund

- The provincial broadband strategy provides the background for providing all Albertans with highspeed internet by 2027. However, the strategy does not include specific initiatives that will be utilized to achieve this goal.
- The Government of Alberta committed $390 million to be delivered through the Universal Broadband Fund with matching funds from the Government of Canada. While this funding is welcome, the slow delivery and lack of transparency is concerning for rural municipalities who require improved internet access.
- The Government of Alberta created the Alberta Broadband Fund, which commits $36 million in funding to expanding broadband networks in Alberta. A unique requirement of the fund is that applicants must demonstrate that they do not meet the universal service standard (50/10 mbps)

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and that federal government data states they do. This approach seeks to address areas that may be left behind by data errors.

Federal Funding

- The RMA appreciates the Government of Canada's national broadband strategy which outlines the plan to provide broadband internet to all Canadians by 2030, as well as the accompanying Universal Broadband Fund to support this goal.
- Federal funding must support the long-term maintenance of broadband infrastructure in rural areas. This should include investment through fees collected from communication and internet providers.
- Future federal funding should be developed through engagement with communities that have not been able to access existing federal programs.

Spectrum

- A large number of rural Albertans receive their internet wirelessly through transmission from towers to their homes and businesses. This technology requires the use of spectrum, which must be managed to meet the needs of rural Albertans.
- The Spectrum Policy Framework for Canada should be revised to minimize the reliance on market forces to govern spectrum management.
- "Use it or lose it" policies should be implemented to ensure spectrum is deployed by internet service providers in a timely manner rather than held as an investment.

Cellular Phone Service

- Large areas of rural Alberta lack consistent cellular phone service. This represents a significant safety risk for rural Albertans and those travelling on Alberta's highways.
- Rural Albertans rely on cell phones for personal and business use. It is critical that the gaps in access are addressed.
- The RMA supports federal and provincial initiatives to build infrastructure to expand Alberta's cellular network.
- Federal data misrepresents the current level of cellular service in rural Alberta. This data gap leads to many rural areas being considered covered, when in reality, they do not have adequate service.

For more information visit: rmalberta.com

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