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POLICY RESOLUTION TEMPLATE

RESOLUTION TITLE: Bridging the Digital Divide by Supporting Rural, Remote, and First Nations Communities Broadband Accessibility Through Coordinated *Dig Once* Policies

SUBMITTED BY: Timmins Chamber of Commerce

ISSUE

Rural, Remote, and First Nations Communities have historically lacked access to reliable broadband connectivity. With broadband infrastructure becoming increasingly expensive to provide to communities with smaller populations, compounded by the great distances between them, more efficient strategies are needed to ensure that all Ontarians have equitable access to reliable, affordable broadband services. Current policies focus less on the direct deployment of fibre to communities which poses challenges for remote and First Nations communities. By increasing the available conduit through sound P3 partnerships, telecommunications providers can move into a previously disadvantaged region more easily. By coordinating with municipalities, a provincial "Dig Once" strategy could significantly reduce costs for future fibre deployments, particularly when coupled with infrastructure-sharing provisions that can benefit these isolated communities.

BACKGROUND

"Dig Once" is a policy that reduces broadband deployment costs by placing conduits (plastic pipes that hold fibre-optic cable) during road construction when access to the trench is easy. Using this method, a conduit can be placed while minimizing the need and cost of excavation and restoration. Later, the fibreoptic cable can then be pulled through the conduit without any excavation.

Digging Once facilitates the installation of conduits in more and more locations in the public right-of-way, encouraging competition among regions with access to modern technology. Ideally, by Digging Once, conduit is being installed in more and more locations in the public right-of-way, encouraging competition, thus lowering the cost of broadband internet. A more robust network also increases economic development, encourages community growth, and creates a more qualified and connected workforce. While other initiatives are in place to close the digital divide, Dig Once policies work to deploy more conduit and fibre at a lower cost in more locations, thus getting Ontario closer to allowing everyone access to reliable internet networks.

As identified in the Ontario Economic Report released by the Ontario Chamber, population decline and other significant economic barriers can clearly be tied to inadequate broadband, an essential driver of intra-provincial migration thanks to the pandemic's push towards digital adoption and work from home. Additionally, many rural, remote, and Far North communities—many of them First Nations, continue to be severely impacted by a lack of access to reliable, affordable broadband, which leaves many of them at risk of falling behind the rest of the province. Providing this vast, expansive resource to these far-reaching "last mile" communities can be costly to both the provider and end-user and would urge governments to consider legislation to alleviate the cost of laying broadband infrastructure to these regions, encouraging investment.

A key means of reducing the cost of future broadband deployments is to have "Dig Once" policies that require the construction of fibre-optic conduit as part of any public works project. Proponents of these policies see this as a crucial part of an enabling framework to empower rural and remote communities to advance broadband connectivity at the local level. Some reasons to implement a Dig Once policy include reducing deployment costs, encouraging competition among internet service providers, and working to close the digital divide.

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If reliable, affordable access to broadband technology continues to dampen economic prosperity in rural, remote, and First Nations communities, then the Provincial Government, in partnership with the Ontario Municipalities, must look to coordinated Dig Once strategies to promote investment from the private sector to encourage the expansion of broadband infrastructure.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Ontario Chamber of Commerce urges the Government of Ontario to:

1. Coordinate with Ontario Municipalities, in partnership with telecommunications and broadband companies, to develop a uniform Dig Once strategy to increase the accessibility of broadband and fibre assets to rural, remote, and First Nations communities.
2. Along with the Municipalities, create regulations that make the laying of conduit/fibre assets mandatory for public infrastructure builds.
3. Through consultation with municipalities and broadband companies, identify best practices for constructing telecom networks in rights-of-way to ensure that municipal assets are protected, including, for example, through the use of permitting and Municipal Access Agreements.
4. Consult with the Federal Government to identify how financial tools can be leveraged to offset investment and provide affordable, equitable access to underserved communities.
5. Where ground-based infrastructure is unattainable, develop accessible alternative solutions.