

DATE: March 9, 2021

TO: Board of Trustees

FROM: Trustee Michael Janz

SUBJECT: Motion re: Internet for All

REFERENCE: [Trustees' Handbook – Section 5.2.2 – Notices of Motion](#)

ISSUE

Notice of motion was served at the February 9, 2021, Board meeting.

BACKGROUND

Access to the internet is now a necessity. The high cost of service affects participation in school, opportunities in the job market, health care, and many other aspects of daily life for our students, staff, and families.

This motion is about the Edmonton Public School Board advocating to the federal and provincial governments, including the CRTC, for immediate initiatives to increase accessibility, quality and reduce the cost of internet for students, staff, and families. This will save all of us time and money.

Many jurisdictions have studied municipal broadband and found that it has not only provided better quality internet at much more affordable prices, but also helped drive down the costs from private internet providers by almost half. Chattanooga, Tennessee studied their municipal broadband for 10 years and found an economic benefit of \$2.69 billion. Researchers, including the most recent study from Harvard have consistently found that [community-owned networks are faster, cheaper, and better](#).

Public education for all can't work if we don't have internet for all

Municipal broadband is about treating the internet like a public utility, like our roads, street lights, or water service rather than a for-profit private company. It's about breaking the duopoly of big providers and bringing competition back to the marketplace and making sure vulnerable people can still have access to health care, services, and education—all of which require internet access.

The pandemic has highlighted how vital internet connectivity is. [It was inspiring to see Toronto City Council take action in ensuring equitable access to the internet by investing in municipal broadband \(ConnectTO\)](#). ([Read the recommendation here.](#)) They will fill in fibre connectivity gaps and provide more affordable options for low-income families who cannot currently afford internet that meets their needs.

Public interest, not excessive private profit

Many telecoms are *incredibly* profitable. Bell Media took \$122 million in payouts from the COVID wage subsidy (CEWS) despite laying off workers and still turning a profit. [Rogers, Bell, and Telus collected more than \\$240 million from Canada's wage-subsidy program, and Bell and Telus raised shareholder payouts](#). Telus' yearly net income regularly exceeds \$1 billion.

We can do much better.

For example, supporting the [CBB as advocated by ACORN Canada and the Public Interest Advocacy Centre](#) would see a payment to reduce internet bills by \$50/month for low-income Canadians and those Canadians qualifying for the CERB benefit. It would largely parallel the \$50USD benefit recently approved in Congress for Americans facing barriers.

Locally, I am unimpressed by existing low-income internet offerings, some of which require proof of family income below \$31,120 per year, which is (punishingly) low. One service only provides a maximum of 25 megabits of download service, which is below the CRTC's minimum recommended threshold of a 50 megabit connection for a typical household. This program merely offers half of a proper internet connection to the absolute poorest families. This is inadequate, as it is too slow and excludes too many people.

Our families should not have their access to a public utility dependent on the whim of a company. We need the government to take action. First in reasserting their role as a regulator. Secondly, taking leadership in public services.

WHY DOES THIS MATTER TO SCHOOL BOARDS?

Internet for All is just as important to participation in education as our school bus system. In late November, I was in a results review meeting with a principal from a school in a lower-income community (here in south-central Edmonton). They shared that one of the barriers their school community faced was access to a telephone, technology, and internet. Some of the families did not even have phones and were unable to be reached. We've heard from other school boards across Canada about the digital divide and how some areas lack connectivity.

Learning from Toronto

Toronto City Councillors passed amendments such as:

- Two requests to the CRTC, to finally implement their 2015 plan for opening wholesale access for fibre broadband, as well as forcing telecom companies to roll over customers' unused data at the end of their billing cycle.
- Expanding the scope of the project's exploration to examine public Wi-Fi options, prioritize low-income neighborhoods and senior citizens, consult with the community and anti-poverty advocates, and locate existing city-owned infrastructure assets to leverage for connectivity.

Community broadband has already been successful in other municipalities across Canada, such as Coquitlam, BC; Stratford, ON and Olds, AB. Where it's been implemented, community broadband has improved customers' choice of providers, connected entire areas to speeds much higher than average, and often lowered Internet bills overall. Here's more information about the [growing digital divide across Canada from NOW Toronto](#).

Thinking big picture for school boards

Public education is the cornerstone of our democracy. Internet connectivity will be a force multiplier for our economic growth and potential in the future.

- What steps as a Board can we take to ensure equitable, universal, barrier-free access to connectivity for Edmonton Public students?
- More broadly, what steps are there that could be taken by partners (especially school boards and local municipalities) to improve access and affordability?

- How could we harness our collective purchasing power in support of our students, staff, or families?
- Albertans have spent millions of dollars [connecting our public assets through the Alberta Supernet](#). As taxpayers, we've already invested in wiring our public institutions, hospitals, schools, and even LRT lines. Can we turn our broadband or supernet into a hub for families? Can we share our internet after school hours with families? What can we do to help the school be a community hub-- as a physical and digital space?
- What if we stopped thinking about the internet as a public commodity that was up to each individual consumer to "pay to play" but instead as a "public utility" like our streetlights or library that could illuminate learning, engagement, and possibility for all of us?

Municipal Broadband is achievable

Some communities have moved towards a municipal broadband model. What could we do to partner with the City and other educational institutions to make Edmonton a hub for the future of telecommunications?

This has enormous potential for all of the partner divisions across Alberta that Division staff are supporting. I'm inspired by the Cree nation in James Bay -- [the Eeyou who helped set up some of the fastest internet anywhere in Canada](#).

"Fibre-to-the-Home" is in the third phase of its plan to connect 14 communities in Eeyou Istchee and James Bay to a modern network at reasonable rates. The package that will be offered to Cree communities will include high speed internet with speeds up to 1 Gbps, as fast as anything in Montreal and Toronto... The package will also include home phone with 12 features and long distance included, and a TV service of more than 100 channels from Canada, the U.S. and around the world. The companies say they will be able to offer the services at prices comparable to similar residential services in Montreal and Quebec City.

RELATED FACTS

- There is a growing interest in Internet as a public utility (municipal broadband) across North America.
- Internet access is essential to our students, staff, and families for participation not only in public education, but society.
- The CRTC could take steps immediately to improve competition, connectivity, quality, and lower prices but they lack the political will to do so.

RECOMMENDATION

1. **That the Edmonton Public School Board affirm that internet access is essential to our students, staff, and families for participation not only in public education, but society, and should be accessible and affordable for all.**
2. **That the Edmonton Public School Board request that provincial school board organizations such as the Alberta Schools Boards Association and the Public School Boards' Association of Alberta advocate to the federal and provincial governments on behalf of all Alberta school divisions for immediate initiatives to increase accessibility and quality and reduce costs of internet for students, staff, and families.**

OPTIONS

1. Approve the recommendation.
2. Provide feedback and request changes to the recommendation for approval.

NEXT STEPS

Following approval of the recommendations, the Edmonton Public School Board will:

- Write a letter of support to the federal government for the \$50 per month “Canadian Broadband Benefit” (CBB) as outlined by the Public Interest Advocacy Centre.
- Write to the Alberta Schools Boards Association and the Public School Boards’ Association of Alberta requesting that they advocate to the federal and provincial governments on behalf of all Alberta school divisions for immediate initiatives to increase accessibility and quality and reduce costs of internet for students, staff, and families.

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