



August 18, 2021

Ref: 115524

First Nations Leaders, Mayors, Regional District Chairs and Alternates
Attendees at the June 24, 2021, Passive Infrastructure Table

Dear Attendees:

Thank you for taking the time to join me and my colleagues Bruce Ralston, Minister of Energy, Mines and Low Carbon Innovation, and Roly Russell, Parliamentary Secretary for Rural Development, on June 24, 2021 to discuss passive infrastructure and its role in helping to expand connectivity to more homes throughout B.C. For those that were not able to attend the meeting, you are receiving this letter as we would like to share with you a summary of the insightful discussions that took place.

We appreciated hearing about the experiences and concerns with accessing the various types of passive infrastructure, and perspectives on how we can work together to overcome some of the challenges. Key themes emerged from the conversation that highlight the need to reduce barriers to connectivity, including addressing common and systemic service delivery, and policy gaps that include permitting, access to utility poles, and taxation. Some of these issues will be easier to tackle than others, and work is underway to do so. These issues will require a collaborative approach with all levels of government and industry to solve them step by step.

We know that high-speed internet is as crucial today as electricity and roads, and we heard during the roundtable that connectivity should be deemed an essential service - a fourth infrastructure by default - and as such be considered in all land-based infrastructure planning and decision-making. This includes better utilization of existing infrastructure such as rail lines for public benefit.

Challenges around timely access to utility poles formed a key part of our discussion. We heard that to enable internet service providers to invest and deploy high-speed networks, access to poles must be more equitable, affordable, timely, transparent, and predictable. Communities, and small and large internet service providers, face considerable challenges as they navigate the permitting process to allow access to utility poles. Excessive wait times to gain access to poles was highlighted as a key reason for project delays.

.../2

To address this issue, my ministry established a permitting and single window process for projects funded through the Connecting British Columbia StrongerBC funding intake. We will continue to use this mechanism to support projects, communities, and service providers by addressing permitting issues that have the potential to delay projects. Additionally, we have initiated work with the Ministry of Mines and Low Carbon Innovation, BC Hydro and TELUS to target improved access to hydro poles.

It was interesting to hear more about your concerns regarding ‘future-proofing’ connectivity. Focusing on achieving 50/10 Mbps, while important, is not sufficient, and planning for emerging technologies, combined with a desire for a lifestyle afforded by working remotely in rural communities, will continue to accelerate demand for connectivity into the future.

I want to assure you that we listen to your concerns and there are some actions we have taken recently in response to feedback. In cooperation with UBCM, we support the Regional Connectivity Knowledge Network (RCKN) and the opportunity it provides us to be in open, ongoing dialogue directly with communities to clearly understand where policy and program improvements can be made. We also recognize the work of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities with its supports for communities to do blanket permitting to accelerate connectivity projects.

Calls to address internet service speeds used to determine program funding eligibility were also raised, and I am pleased to report that we took steps to address the funding eligibility issue in early May when the Ministry of Citizens’ Services, UBCM, and Northern Development Initiative Trust (NDIT) launched an independent study to understand why there are differences between the broadband internet speeds experienced in some B.C. communities, and the 50/10 Mbps speed identified on the federal government’s National Broadband Internet Service Availability Map.

The study, which is underway, will produce information on internet speeds experienced in rural and remote communities, supporting analysis, and informing dialogue between the NDIT, Indigenous and local governments, internet service providers, the Province, and the federal government. Data gathering and analysis continues this summer, and we anticipate the study results in the fall. We encourage everyone to participate in the study by having their residents, businesses, and other community stakeholders complete the CIRA Internet speed test so that we can improve the accuracy and depth of the Internet speed data for their area. The link to the speed test can be found at <https://performance.cira.ca/bc>.

While we have made some progress and appreciate your acknowledgement that efforts by the Province have benefitted many areas, we also understand that bringing B.C. to a place where everyone can access high-speed internet requires solutions for the remaining connectivity needs, which are higher cost and require different strategies to resolve. In 2017, we estimated 25% of rural and Indigenous communities were fully connected with all households having access to minimum speeds of 50/10 Mbps. Today, that percentage is nearing 40%. When all the projects in flight by service providers are complete, including those that are federally and/or provincially funded, we will see that number increase to over 60%. This is progress but going forward we will need to tackle some of the most challenging and expensive areas to connect, and novel approaches will be required to fill in the remaining gaps.

Working to connect all people in B.C. – regardless of where they live – is a priority for our government. Building on the Province’s most recent investments totalling \$180 million, Budget 2021 establishes stable base funding of \$40 million over the plan to further invest in the Province’s connectivity strategy. This will provide better high-speed internet and cell coverage to help connect more people in rural, remote and Indigenous communities and Connecting British Columbia funding is available now for projects.

My ministry staff would welcome continuing the dialogue with you and your community leaders to better understand the issues. If you would like to discuss this further or receive additional information on the Province's activities to expand high-speed internet connectivity and on passive infrastructure, please contact [Howard Randell](#), Executive Director, Network BC at 250-415-6867. For information about the RCKN group or other community planning questions, please contact [Jeanne Holliss](#), A/Executive Director, Connected Communities at 250-516-3848.

We all have a vested interest in improving services in B.C., and solutions begin with a common understanding of the nature of the barriers, and how we can each effect change. We continue to benefit from the insights each of you shared. Thank you again for your participation, ongoing leadership, and collaboration as we collectively work towards a better future for British Columbians.

Sincerely,



Lisa Beare
Minister

pc: Honourable Bruce Ralston
Minister of Energy, Mines and Low Carbon Innovation

Roly Russell
Parliamentary Secretary for Rural Development
Ministry of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development

Connected Communities
ConnectedCommunitiesBC@gov.bc.ca