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Broadband for-profit: The dilemma in rural Wilmot



Reliable rural Wi-Fi has been an issue in Wilmot for nearly two decades. Some solutions are on the horizon but not without hurdles. (Photo credit: Lisa Hagen)

By Rose Danen

The struggle for high-speed internet access in rural Wilmot has been top of mind for the community since the pandemic hit last year, but Kevin Thomason's fight for decent internet access began almost 20 years ago in Bell Canada's head office with \$50,000 in a briefcase.

"Even 20 years ago, we needed bandwidth that didn't exist," said Thomason.

Thomason, who is a tech start-up coach and mentor, lives in the far north-east corner of Wilmot near Sunfish Lake, a

practically dead zone in terms of internet access.

Back then, he and his neighbours were inquiring with Bell about the possibility of hooking into the high speed fibre optics of the new Waterloo subdivisions that were creeping towards their community. Engineers from Bell came out to survey the area and determined it would cost the company \$330,000 to connect Sunfish Lake, according to Thomason.

"They couldn't do it because the lifetime value of all customers in the area

was only \$280,000 so therefore they would lose \$50,000," he said.

So Thomason devised a plan. He went to 50 of his neighbours who teamed up with him and each wrote a cheque for \$1,000.

"I literally put all the checks in a briefcase and went to Bell's head office in Toronto and walked through the front door and said 'Look. Here's the \$50,000 you need to break even,' and left the briefcase on their boardroom table and went on my way," said Thomason.

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Canada Day in Wilmot pivots

Event takes on reverent timbre

By Lisa Hagen

An independent, not-for-profit group of local residents, who have organized Wilmot's Canada Day for the past several years, has decided to change up the celebration in light of recent events around residential school deaths. The Wilmot committee is the first known group in the region to pivot on the July 1st event.

In a press release, spokesperson Angie Hallman introduced herself as a first-generation, proud Canadian who sees Canada as a place of opportunity with the "promise of being better than it was the day before."

She recounted a story of a childhood friend returning from serving in Afghanistan and un-velcro'ing his Canadian flag from his uniform and pressing it into the hand of her young daughter.

"I will never forget this moment, the changed man, and the pain I saw in his eyes that day," she said. "There are moments when family and community members experience great loss, and we have no words, we stop, sit, and grieve in silence with them. The simple, silent action can convey support in a powerful way that is felt rather than heard."

Tying these experiences into Canada Day, Hallman said that the day brings to mind many things to be grateful for, including people who protect our rights and freedoms, and for cherished family time together.

However, she noted that this is not the story for everyone living here.

"Growing up in New Hamburg I didn't learn about the Indigenous people the way that I am now, taking responsibility to educate myself and teach my children about a rich yet painful history of sister nations. I respect her sister nations of Turtle Island and I am committed to further learning and unlearning where needed.

"I acknowledge that the Indigenous commu-

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The briefcase made it all the way to the president of Bell Canada, according to Thomason, because the accounting department had no idea what to do with it. Bell eventually decided to return all the cheques but upgraded their internet anyway.

"I still have all the cheques sitting in my safe here 17 years later. I'm sure they're long since stale dated."

Today, the residents of Sunfish Lake and area are still running on the DSL service that Bell installed back then. It is attached to the telephone lines that were installed in the 1930s and provides them with a download speed of 5 megabits per second.

Thomason's story highlights one of the biggest hurdles facing the township to this day in the quest to expand high-speed internet access to rural Wilmot. The township has to rely on telecom companies to expand broadband internet services but the low return of investment makes rural broadband projects unattractive to the companies.

"The world of monopoly is gone, and now it just comes down to the rate of return for an investment," said Ken Naylor, general manager of Mornington Communications.

Mornington is an independent telecom company that has been focusing on broadband projects in the rural, underserved communities that larger companies such as Bell and Rogers have shown less interest in.

"They have to make their shareholders happy. So, if the rate of return isn't good, they're not going to go ahead with the project," said Naylor. "That leaves a bit of a window for us to step in to do things. But it is that lower rate of return, so it's not as attractive."

Thomason and his neighbours have experienced this dilemma first hand as they've continued to seek faster internet speeds.

"At the time, it was sufficient," said Thomason. "But in an era right now where the government mandates between 25 and 50 megabits, most people consider 100 Mbps the minimum for high speed."

People in Thomason's community have tried to work with multiple companies over the years, meeting with executives and engineers, mapping out potential routes for lines to be laid, and trying to figure out how to make it profitable for the telecoms.

"There's just never been anything that's come out to be viable. In the end, we sit here with our crummy internet," said Thomason.

The township, which does not play a role in determining where and when high-speed internet expansion projects will happen, is limited in addressing this dilemma, according to Jeff Molenhuis, director of Public Works

and Engineering.

"We really are reliant on the third party telecoms to undertake the expansion projects," said Molenhuis. "We can't force the hand of any telecom or third party to do the work. They need to come to those terms themselves."

Molenhuis said the township's main role in the expansion of high-speed internet is establishing Municipal Access Agreements. MAAs establish risk management as well as the roles and responsibilities of the township and the companies for each broadband project.

"We're trying to work with telecoms and trying to support their work and trying to support the ease of their work," Molenhuis said.

At the council level, the main goal is advocacy for rural high-speed internet access.

"The only role that I can be at this level in government is an advocate and use the tools in my position to advocate to the provincial government and the federal government," said Wilmot Counc. Angie Hallman.

Hallman has been advocating for more broadband funding through the Rural Ontario Municipalities Association and the Association of Municipalities Ontario.

However, the township has in the past hindered the development of rural broadband infrastructure, according to Naylor.

"They have to be very careful about how much space they give up," said Naylor. "In the past, they've been very tight on that and you have to jump through a lot of hoops to get access to a strip of land to put your cable in."

In June 2020, Naylor wrote a letter to the Mayor and CAO of Wilmot with concerns about the abnormally high fees associated with signing an MAA with the township. The letter requested that the council review the associated \$10,000 registration fee and the annual \$5,000 general administrative fee that Mornington would have to pay for a project that would connect three rural homes in Wilmot.

"Those fees apply to anyone that's doing any work. We do have standard agreement fees. That's part of our fees and charges by-law, and standard application of permit fees," said Molenhuis.

Naylor said Wilmot has recently reviewed and removed some of the barriers for new broadband projects, but does not specify which barriers. Mornington signed an MAA with Wilmot in March for an upcoming project along Wilmot Easthope Road and for potential future projects.

"There's still a couple of things I'd still like to see differently but they took away everything that was really the show stopper that was causing me to not do any kind of investment in their township before," said Naylor.

There is some funding coming down the pipeline to help

offset the costs of broadband internet infrastructure. So far, the federal government has launched a \$1.75 billion universal broadband fund and the Ontario government has pledged nearly \$1 billion over six years to broadband internet expansion.

The SWIFT project is also currently helping subsidize the costs of rural broadband expansion projects in Wilmot. The Waterloo Region has been working with SWIFT to determine projects of interest, according to Hallman.

SWIFT is currently subsidizing Mornington's project along Wilmot Easthope Road, as well as projects in Haysville and along Notre Dame Drive. Hallman said that Shingletown is also currently a community of interest for a SWIFT project.


"It's fantastic to see all this SWIFT money being handed out across the province. The problem is that it's not coming anywhere near us (at Sunfish Lake)," said Thomason.

Unfortunately, the gaps around current broadband projects won't be filled anytime soon because manufacturers and contractors don't have the capacity for all the new projects that have come out with all this new funding, according to Naylor.

"If I was asked to launch a project tomorrow I would say I cannot, because I cannot get materials. It's going to be at least a year before I can actually launch something new," said Naylor.

"The truth is, it's going to be time and waiting for investment of infrastructure... as we keep laying these trunks in main areas, it'll become easier and easier to connect those main trunks together and fill in those gaps," said Hallman.

"When you're trying daily to get through a pandemic, being told your solution is years away, it isn't exactly what you want to hear," said Thomason. "Having already been at this for 20 years, I have zero confidence that any of this will come together in the next few years."



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