**HICEEC’s Work on Improving Local Internet Service**

HICEEC’s efforts to improve local internet began in 2016, with lobbying of Telus that resulted in installation of a new hub at Sandpiper and Central in March 2018. But major benefit from this $118,000 project was limited to the Sandpiper subdivision; the farther from the hub, the slower the service. And Telus informed HICEEC that no other areas of Hornby could be upgraded with this type of system.

In 2018, the federal government called for a long-term internet connectivity strategy, and HICEEC began working to position our island for inclusion in the resulting programs (e.g. through designation of Hornby as an “underserved area”) and thus eligible for programs, and lobbying of our MP.

In its 2019 budget, the federal government made the commitment that access to services providing internet at speeds of 50 Mbps for downloads and 10 Mbps for uploads would be available to 95% of Canada’s homes and businesses by 2026, and to 100% by 2030. The investment will be $5-6 billion over the next decade.

To qualify for internet improvement funding, however, communities must take the initiative—show strong support for improved internet service and have plans to implement it. So in 2019, HICEEC and the Denman Island Ratepayer’s Association formed an Internet Working Group. Here’s what we’ve done:

* Obtained $35,000 in grants to produce a Hornby-Denman Digital Roadmap & Implementation Plan, which the BC Ministry of Citizens’ Services deemed necessary.
* Contracted with Baylink Networks, an internet technology design company, to develop plans for providing 100% fibre-optic connections to every household on Denman and Hornby within 2 years of receiving government funding.
* This work included local consultations that confirmed the growing importance of online activity; the negative impact of slow, unreliable service; the failure of local internet service to come close to meeting the 50/10 Mbps standard; and preference for fibre-optic cable.
* Successfully lobbied for adding Hornby and Denman to the Connected Coast project, which will run an undersea fibreoptic cable around Vancouver Island and northward. Funding at this level required regional district involvement, and in fall 2020, the CVRD agreed to sponsor Connected Coast cable landing sites on our islands.

In January 2021 the CVRD Board approved a resolution to support CityWest, a corporation owned by the City of Prince Rupert, to apply for senior government grants for up to 90% funding to provide “last mile” infrastructure (i.e., fibre-optic lines from the trunk cable landing site to local households). The board also agreed to look into contributing up to 10% of the funding.

A July 2021 CVRD staff report recommends that the CVRD establish a new broadband connectivity service in partnership with CityWest (citing the profit-sharing business case presented by HICEEC/DIRA), and borrow the 10% ($760,000) to pay for last mile infrastructure. The loan would be repaid by increasing local property taxes; for the average house, the annual cost would range from about $23 to $67, depending in part on repayment periods and the profit-sharing arrangement. Elector approval would be required.

For more information on this story, see www.HornbyDenmaninternet.com

John Heinegg - July/21