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## Report 2025-030

**Report Title:** Broadband Communications and Implementation Strategy

**Committee Name:** Economic Development, Tourism and Planning

**Committee Meeting Date:** February 5, 2025

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**Approved by:** Jennifer Moore, CAO

**Council Meeting Date:** February 19, 2025

**Strategic Plan Priorities:**  Innovate for Service Excellence  
 Ignite Economic Opportunity  
 Foster a Thriving Community  
 Propel Sustainable Growth  
 Champion a Vibrant Future

## Information Report

“**That** the Economic Development, Tourism and Land Use Planning Committee receive Report 2025-030 ‘Broadband Communications and Implementation Strategy’ for information; and

**Further That** the Committee recommend that County Council receive this report for information.”

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### Purpose

The purpose of this report is to provide an update on the Northumberland County Broadband Project regarding communications and implementation.

### Background

High-speed internet connectivity is essential for fostering a thriving, inclusive, and resilient Northumberland County. However, like many rural communities, Northumberland has faced challenges in achieving widespread broadband access due to its hilly terrain, a dispersed population, and complex infrastructure requirements. These challenges are all barriers to Internet Service Provider investment in network expansion.

Recognizing that reliable internet access serves as a foundation for local economic growth, community well-being, and long-term sustainability, the County has prioritized closing broadband gaps.

Expanding broadband access is a cornerstone of Northumberland County's 2019 Digital Strategy, a key component of its 2023-2027 Community Strategic Plan, and the primary recommendation from the industry-led COVID-19 Economic Recovery Task Force, all of which identified connectivity as vital for supporting economic growth, enhancing quality of life, and ensuring equal access to digital resources for all residents.

In response, Northumberland County has spearheaded a public-private model to build a high-speed telecommunications network that will enable delivery of broadband services to over 11,000 currently underserved or unserved households (refer to Appendix A for the project map). This innovative approach leverages federal and provincial funding combined with private sector investment to establish a reliable, utility-grade network. Designed to provide minimum speeds of 1 gigabit per second (1 Gbps) and scale to meet future needs, this infrastructure will equip residents, businesses, and institutions with the digital tools necessary to thrive in a connected world.

Funding for the project was secured through successful applications to the federal Universal Broadband Fund (UBF) and the provincial Improving Connectivity for Ontario (ICON) program. Together, these contributions enabled the engagement of a private sector partner in a formal public-private partnership to design and build the network.

### Timeline and Challenges

Delivering broadband access to rural areas like Northumberland County is a complex undertaking. Since the initial announcement in 2022, considerable time was needed to secure

the right internet service partner, attract private investment, and address technical challenges associated with the region's geography.

After securing public funding, the County conducted a thorough process to identify and engage a suitable private sector partner for long-term sustainability and the capacity to deliver meaningful connectivity improvements across the county.

With the finalization of key partnerships underway, focus is turning to the physical installation of the network. Drafting of the installation plan is proceeding, and although a detailed construction schedule has not been determined, construction is expected to begin in mid-March 2025. The goal is to connect over 11,000 underserved and unserved households by the end of 2025 – a key condition of the public funding.

The County is currently working with partners to develop a structured project timeline with clear milestones and accountability measures. Regular updates will be provided to the community so residents can monitor progress.

### **Project Implementation**

The first step in the process for implementation is for the Internet Service Provider (ISP) to obtain Municipal Consent from each road authority having jurisdiction. The Municipal Consent applications will include information regarding the proposed locations of the network cable, the length of cable included in the submission, depth of bury, utility pole location if required and proposed installation method. It should be noted that a typical Municipal Consent application for this project is expected to include 3-10km of network cable and that there is a total of 1125 km of network cable to be installed for this project. The County and Member Municipalities will receive Municipal Consent applications, complete a review and issue approval if the details provided are acceptable. The review process typically consists of a desktop review, field review, drawing markup and return to the ISP either with approval or request for re-submission. The Municipal Consent review process must be completed within the timelines set out in the provincial Building Broadband Faster Act.

In accordance with the Building Broadband Faster Act, 2021, S.O. 2021, c. 2, Sched. 1 a Municipality having jurisdiction shall respond to a Municipal Consent application:

- a) within 10 business days of receiving the application where the proponent requires access to 30km or less of a municipal highway or municipal right of way
- b) within 15 business days of receiving the application where the proponent requires access to more than 30km of a municipal highway or municipal right of way

Network cables will primarily be buried along County, Municipal or private rights-of-way. In the areas where this is not feasible it will be an aerial installation using existing utility poles or new utility poles will be installed. Any property disruption during installation is expected to be minimal, and restoration work will return affected areas to their original condition. Restoration work may be delayed if weather conditions are not favorable. Residents will be notified in advance if any work is required on their property and will need to provide permission.

As the broadband network is rolled out, physical connections will be made to homes. The installation and connection of high-speed internet to each household **will be completed at no cost to residents** as part of the project's funding. Should residents choose to connect they will gain access to high-speed internet as soon as their area is connected, without waiting for the

entire network to be completed. All eligible property owners are being encouraged to take advantage of the optional installation during the project timeline. Future connection requests post-2025 project may result in costs to owners as a separate installation process.

Through this initiative, Northumberland County, with funding from the Federal and Provincial governments and private partner, is addressing long-standing connectivity challenges, enabling economic growth, and fostering social inclusion in the digital age. By overcoming technical and financial obstacles, the County is poised to deliver on its promise – and the promise of all levels of government – to close connectivity gaps and ensure all residents have access to the benefits of high-speed internet.

Road users and residents can expect to see construction crews working on County and Municipal roadways in various locations at any given time. Lane closures may be required to complete some of the work, however full road closures are not expected. As the construction details are determined, they will be communicated to the public and will include timelines, locations of construction crews, lane restrictions or closures and any changes to the schedule.

County staff are working closely with the Internet Service Provider to develop a robust communication plan designed to foster community awareness, project partner collaboration, and municipal partner support. The overarching goal will be to generate widespread awareness of, and interest in, the broadband service among the over 11,000 underserved and unserved households, by effectively communicating service benefits along with project progress.

The plan is tailored to address the needs of various audiences and targeted geographical locations for installation deployment. A separate communications and engagement plan is being developed in collaboration with Alderville First Nation to secure approvals to access Reserve lands. This will include community workshops and listening sessions to address Alderville First Nation's unique needs, supported with culturally sensitive communication strategies and trusted community communication channels.

The communications plan emphasizes educating municipal staff, engaging Alderville First Nation, preparing residents for installation, and driving high adoption rates for network connections. By addressing potential challenges with transparent updates, targeted outreach to implementation areas, and consistent messaging, the County will build trust and engagement with municipal staff and residents. Focus will be on clarifying roles, streamlining contacts, and driving high service adoption and sign-up rates, propelling the success of the broadband initiative.

## **Consultations**

N/A

## **Legislative Authority / Risk Considerations**

As previously noted, in accordance with the Building Broadband Faster Act, 2021, S.O. 2021, c. 2, Sched. 1 a Municipality having jurisdiction shall respond to a Municipal Consent application;

- c) within 10 business days of receiving the application where the proponent requires access to 30km or less of a municipal highway or municipal right of way
- d) within 15 business days of receiving the application where the proponent requires access to more than 30km of a municipal highway or municipal right of way

## **Discussion / Options**

As the Northumberland County Broadband Project transitions into its implementation phase, County staff have identified several critical areas requiring collaboration, preparation, and clear communication to ensure a successful rollout of the broadband network.

One key tactic will be the delivery of tailored presentations and information packages to member municipalities. These materials will introduce the County project team, outline the project details, and provide any available construction timelines. Member municipalities can use this information to update their councils and prepare for local engagement.

Additionally, staff are working in partnership with the Internet Service Provider (ISP) to develop communication materials for County operations staff, municipal staff, and construction crews. These materials will address resident inquiries, outline connection processes, and include contact details for further support.

The implementation of a comprehensive communication and engagement strategy is essential for minimizing confusion, driving awareness, and ensuring the successful adoption of broadband services. This strategy will include public updates on construction schedules, lane restrictions, and connection options, along with targeted outreach to specific communities, including culturally sensitive approaches for Alderville First Nation.

By addressing these considerations, the County aims to maintain transparency, foster public trust, and bridge the digital divide for over 11,000 underserved and unserved households across Northumberland County.

## **Financial Impact**

Funding for the project was secured through successful applications to the federal Universal Broadband Fund (UBF) and the provincial Improving Connectivity for Ontario (ICON) program. Together, these contributions assisted in enabling the selection of a private sector partner to design and build the network and develop a public-private partnership.

## **Member Municipality Impacts**

Network cables will be installed within member municipality right of ways. County Staff will consult with member municipalities regarding the project details and timelines. Municipalities will receive and process Municipal Consent applications from the Internet Service Provider. County staff will provide support to the member municipalities regarding communication and responding to public inquiries.

## **Conclusion / Outcomes**

High-speed internet connectivity is essential for fostering a thriving, inclusive, and resilient Northumberland County. Like many rural communities, Northumberland has faced challenges in achieving widespread broadband access due to its hilly terrain, a dispersed population, and complex infrastructure requirements. Recognizing that reliable internet access serves as a foundation for local economic growth, community well-being, and long-term sustainability, the County has prioritized closing broadband gaps. With funding from provincial and federal partners secured, the County is spearheading a public-private partnership to build a future-proof telecommunications network that will bridge the existing digital divide, delivering tangible benefits to residents and businesses across Northumberland.

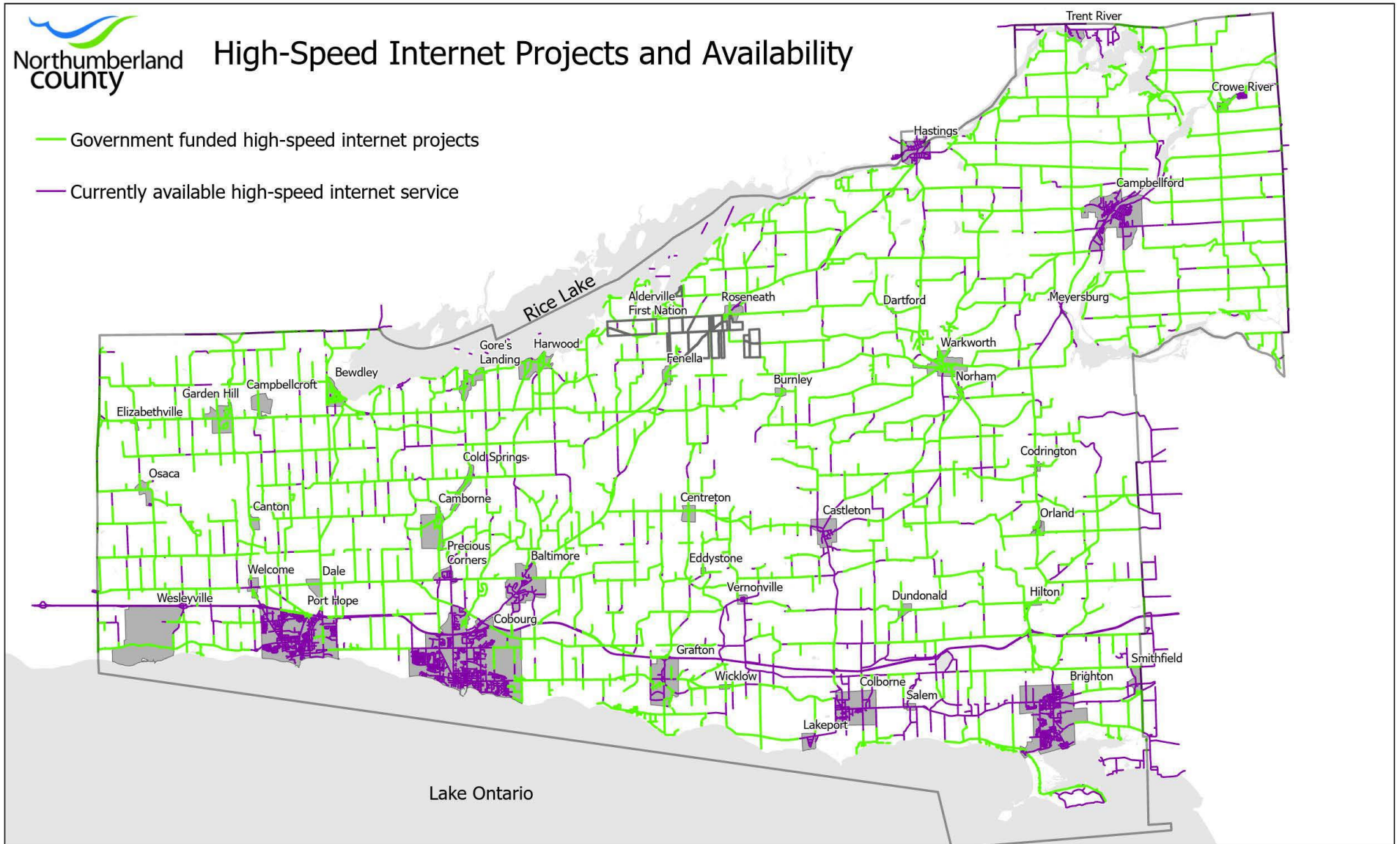
With the finalization of key partnerships underway, focus is turning to the physical installation of the network. Drafting of the installation plan is proceeding, and although a detailed construction schedule has not been determined, construction is expected to begin in mid-March 2025. The goal is to connect over 11,000 underserved and unserved households by the end of 2025 – a key condition of the public funding.

The County is developing a structured project timeline with clear milestones and accountability measures. Regular updates will be provided to the community so residents can monitor progress.

### **Attachments**

- 1) Report 2025-030 ATTACH 1 'Appendix A - Broadband Map'

## Appendix A - Broadband Map



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