

Eastern Ontario Regional Network Proposes Ultra-Fast Gig Internet Project

Long-Term Solution for Rural Connectivity Key to Economic Recovery

(August 11, 2020) – The Eastern Ontario Regional Network (EORN) is seeking federal and provincial support to deliver ultra-fast, Gig internet to homes and businesses in the region through a \$1.6 billion public-private partnership.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the crisis in rural internet access. It has impacted businesses, student learning, healthcare and government services. The EORN Gig Project aims to fix the issue with a comprehensive solution that ensures the region recovers from the pandemic, supports economic growth and helps build vibrant communities for the long term.

“This would be a game-changer for eastern Ontario to attract and retain businesses and residents, and to compete globally over the long term,” said Andy Letham, Chair of the Eastern Ontario Wardens’ Caucus.

An internet speed of 1 gigabit per second (1 Gbps or 1,000 Mbps) would provide seamless, reliable connectivity to support and meet growing demand over the long run. It also supports real-time data sharing needed for smart technologies.

“Demand for broadband is growing exponentially. Half-measures and baby steps won’t get us there. We need a long-term solution,” said EORN Chair J. Murray Jones. “The EORN Gig Project is a lasting investment in our prosperity.”

EORN would seek to fund the project through a combination of funding from the federal and provincial governments, loans from the Canada Infrastructure Bank and the private sector.

The Canada Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) declared 50 Mbps download and 10 Mbps upload internet speeds as a minimum basic service level. Without additional public investment, it is unlikely that parts of eastern Ontario would reach these service levels before 2030. The average global broadband speed in 2020 is 92 Mbps and is projected to reach 110 Mbps by 2023, according to the Cisco Annual Internet Report.

“Asking rural customers to settle for the minimum level of service when urban residents and businesses currently enjoy far greater speeds is just not acceptable. Our residents and businesses need to be on the same playing field as those in towns and cities,” said Jones.

The EORN Gig project anticipates future needs for an investment that would last a generation by delivering speeds 20 times the minimum standard. The project has the potential to serve as a model for regions across Canada.

Delivering Gig service generally involves a fibre optic or cable connection to the home or business. The EORN Gig Project leverages previous investments in infrastructure and services. This includes a fibre optic backbone and other infrastructure across the region built to handle the speed and capacity of the Gig project .

About EORN

EORN, a non-profit created by the Eastern Ontario Wardens' Caucus (EOWC), works with governments and community organizations to improve and leverage broadband access to fuel economic development and growth.

From 2010 to 2014, EORN helped to improve broadband access to nearly 90 per cent of eastern Ontario through a \$175 million public-private partnership. The network was funded by federal, provincial and municipal governments and private sector service providers. As a result of the project, 423,000 homes and businesses are now able to access services of up to 10 Mbps download. It also spurred more than \$100 million in additional private sector investment in the region, over and above their initial commitments.

EORN is currently working on a \$213 million project, funded by public and private sector partners, to improve and expand cellular services across the region. Building on that project is expected to begin in early 2021.

The EORN Gig Project would serve a geographic area that includes 13 municipal members of EOWC, including:

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| • County of Frontenac | • County of Northumberland |
| • County of Haliburton | • County of Peterborough |
| • County of Hastings | • United Counties of Prescott and Russell |
| • City of Kawartha Lakes (single tier) | • County of Prince Edward (single tier) |
| • County of Lanark | • County of Renfrew |
| • United Counties of Leeds and Grenville | • United Counties of Stormont, Dundas |
| • County of Lennox and Addington | and Glengarry |

Quick Facts

- Eastern Ontario is home to more than one million people spread out over 50,000 square kilometers, about the size of Nova Scotia. Our rural communities connect major Canadian cities like Toronto, Montreal and Ottawa.
- The region is an important cross-border business corridor. It lies within 800 kilometres of more than 50 million people in the U.S. and Canada.
- Nearly 103,000 small and medium-sized businesses operate in rural eastern Ontario. Almost sixty percent of those responding to a survey by the Eastern Ontario Leadership Council said broadband is the number one priority their business.
- In 2018, eastern Ontario businesses created \$45.2 billion in exports.
- Eastern Ontario is home to 96,000 waterfront property owners. In a 2018 survey by the Federation of Ontario Cottagers' Associations, respondents said lack of broadband was one of the three top barriers to working from the cottage and being able to spend more time in these communities.

- COVID-19 has transformed demands on businesses to go digital. According to global consulting firm McKinsey & Company:
 - “Fully 75 per cent of people using digital channels for the first time indicate that they will continue to use them when things return to “normal.” Companies will need to ensure that their digital channels are on par with or better than those of their competition to succeed in this new environment.”
 - “... recent data show that we have vaulted five years forward in consumer and business digital adoption in a matter of around eight weeks.”

Quotes

“In a few short months, robust online connectivity has become mission-critical for nearly every business. Digital technology is driving everything from new product or service development, to marketing, operations, and attracting skilled employees. Online learning is key to maintaining a skilled, resilient workforce. That is why the Eastern Ontario Leadership Council believes that the EORN Gig Project is the very foundation of regional economic development.”

- Kathy Wood, Project Coordinator for Eastern Ontario Leadership Council

“As Mayor of a high-growth rural municipality, the lack of rural broadband has quickly become the number one challenge in my community since COVID hit. High-speed, reliable rural broadband is now imperative – not just for accessing basic services like paying bills online – but for everything from virtual medical appointments, streaming classes and sustaining employment to running a business. The urgency to invest in the Gig Project in eastern Ontario is akin to the priority governments place on urban transit, without the same dollar figure. Quality of life, access to education and training, jobs, economic productivity, and the retention and expansion of local business will absolutely suffer unless we fix this problem for a generation now.”

- Nancy Peckford, Mayor of the Municipality of North Grenville

“Access to online learning has become absolutely essential for all students to have the same opportunities to achieve their post-secondary goals. The need for flexible and effective distance learning is only going to grow. The EORN Gig Project would make it possible for our students to remotely learn and access student success services, including mental health supports.”

- Dr. Ann Marie Vaughan, President and CEO, Loyalist College

“While the EORN Gig Project represents a major investment by the public sector in partnership with the private sector, it’s necessary infrastructure for the future of education and training, and for the future of businesses in rural communities. Without this investment, the knowledge and skills necessary to prosper in the new economy will be compromised for those who don’t have broadband access, and opportunities in commerce – for buyers and sellers – will be hindered.”

- Maureen Adamson, President, Fleming College

“Through the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen that virtual healthcare programs have the potential to dramatically impact how healthcare is provided across our community. We also know that technology can play an important role in the equitable delivery of healthcare services to our rural residents. Connectivity is an important piece of the puzzle for Northumberland’s Ontario Health Team to carry out priorities such as community paramedicine (including remote patient monitoring), rural outreach clinics, volunteer peer support, and strategic planning.”

- Linda Davis, President and CEO, Northumberland Hills Hospital and spokesperson for Ontario Health Team for Northumberland

“Cottage residents have strong ties to their cottage communities. They represent an untapped resource in terms of creating new businesses and economic growth. The EORN Gig Project would tackle a major barrier to economic development in these communities, from attracting visitors and tourists, to converting cottagers to permanent residents and local business owners. “

- Terry Rees, Executive Director, Federation of Ontario Cottagers' Associations

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