

Senator, service provider warn of crisis in Nunavut over internet access, affordability

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Senator Dennis Patterson walks off Parliament Hill, in Ottawa, on Feb. 26, 2013.

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Internet access and affordability in Nunavut are at a point of crisis that requires federal assistance, say the territory's senator and a major service provider.

Senator Dennis Patterson said in an interview that the territory has been "left out in the dark" despite funding announcements promised by the federal government to help bridge what it called the digital divide.

Spending has yet to trickle down to the territory to provide critical service needed by thousands of residents, Mr. Patterson said.

He said he has "a sense of crisis about this" because of how much Nunavut residents rely on the internet, especially with a heightened need during the pandemic to access health information and to connect isolated families.

"This cliff was known to be coming. This is the result of neglect and a failure to respond to expressed needs months ago."

Last week, Mr. Patterson asked Senator Marc Gold, the government representative in the Red Chamber, when the federal government will take concrete steps to protect access of Nunavut residents to reliable and reasonably priced internet.

Mr. Patterson mentioned three service providers to Mr. Gold: SSi Canada, which provides access to 67 per cent of residents outside of Iqaluit; another provider that has had its internet service interrupted by fog and rain; and a third provider that said it would pull out of the territory.

"The lack of new funding assistance means that thousands of households are at imminent risk of losing the internet or having to pay huge amounts," he said.

SSi Canada is asking Ottawa to look at urgent solutions.

The company launched its service, known as QINIQ, in 2005. It says that since then, a large majority of households in the territory have relied on it.

The company said that service is now at risk for reasons that include the lapse of a federal government subsidy. As a result, the full cost of broadband and available satellite capacity is pushed to the limit.

In 2015, the federal government announced a \$35-million investment through the Connecting Canadians program to extend and enhance broadband service available to communities in

Nunavut.

In an urgent letter sent to the Prime Minister's Office and a number of government departments on Oct. 1, SSi's chief development officer, Dean Proctor, said the subsidy has now lapsed in 23 of 25 Nunavut communities, with Pond Inlet and Iqaluit being the two exceptions.

The company has reached a difficult but "inevitable decision" to stop new account sign-ups in the most congested communities to help reduce strain on the network and to allow existing customers to have access to an acceptable quality of service, he said.

"SSi is also evaluating how to manage the increased costs to deliver broadband with the loss of subsidies," Mr. Proctor wrote.

He said the company has been working to avoid the situation but noted there have not been funding decisions for Nunavut from the CRTC Broadband Fund to improve network capacity and reduce service costs.

SSi has also been waiting for the new federal Universal Broadband Fund since it was announced in March of 2019, Mr. Proctor wrote.

"SSi cannot subsidize QINIQ broadband service in all communities without assistance."

Marie-Pier Baril, a press secretary for Rural Economic Development Minister Maryam Monsef, said in a statement that access to services, opportunities to connect in isolation and telework all depend on high-speed internet.

"Even before the COVID-19 crisis began, the government recognized that fast, reliable and affordable high-speed internet is a necessity, not a luxury, for all Canadians, including those living in rural and remote communities," Ms. Baril said.

The federal government has a plan to make sure communities with limited or no access benefit from high-speed internet, she added, citing investments such as \$1.7-billion in the 2019 federal budget to support high-speed internet, which included \$1-billion for the Universal Broadband Fund. She said the fund would launch soon.

Ms. Baril also said the CRTC has established a \$750-million fund to "help provide all Canadians with access to broadband internet and mobile wireless services."

"They recently announced funding for five projects that included four in the North and future project announcements are expected," she said.

In response to the statement from Minister Monsef's spokeswoman, Mr. Proctor said the company appreciates there are various broadband funding programs announced and launched by the CRTC and the federal government, but he added that delays in releasing funds will lead to hardships for Nunavut residents.

"Without a commitment to federal assistance – support that we will match with SSI's own investments – we will be required to reduce satellite capacity and increase retail internet rates, which will cause thousands of Nunavut homes to lose subsidized internet access," he said.

"We are trying to avert a crisis. If not addressed now, thousands of connected households will lose what capacity they have due to government inaction."

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