Clement to investigate broadband speed in area

By Matthew Sitler

Parry Sound-Muskoka MP and Minister for FedNor Tony Clement will look into whether Muskoka Community Network's (MCN) communication tower technology is meeting FedNor's broadband speed requirements.

Recently, District of Muskoka councillor Bob Colhoun reported he was only receiving 210 or 212 kilobytes per second when he did an Internet speed test. He said he receives broadband off MCN's Kilworthy tower.

When asked, MCN executive director Rob McPhee said the organization is meeting FedNor requirements, but declined to provide details.

"Everyone can have an opinion on the network," he said. "We're not going to provide comments for the media on a public critique of a technical performance of a network, to have a debate in the public arena on the technical performance," he said.

George Morris, co-owner of Candlelight Communications Ltd., however, remains skeptical that MCN is meeting FedNor's required speed of 1.5 megabits per second per customer.

Morris said back in 2006, when FedNor was looking to achieve as much broadband coverage as possible in unserved and underserved areas of the riding, Candlelight bid to provide service on the part of the project that covers southern Almaguin, areas closer to Parry Sound and northeastern parts of Muskoka Lakes Township. It did not bid on the southern Muskoka portion, for which MCN received the contract.

According to Morris, this was partly because Candlelight felt the technology used to provide broadband in these southern areas would not satisfy FedNor's stated speed requirements. It also would not be profitable for Candlelight, he said.

"The technology that's in use here is in a shared environment," explained Morris. "In other words, you now have a number of people using a shared resource (towers with Motorola Canopy technology). The actual technology being used has very little bandwidth available to each group of people using it. All the customer radios talk to a single radio on the tower that provides the connection. The problem is the radio on the tower is limited to about five megabits of throughput. When you have a standard that requires 1.5 megabits available for each customer, you can't put very many customers on each tower and still get high speed for each customer."

Were Candlelight to have applied for the southern contract, it should have been held to account to deliver 1.5 megabits to each customer, said Morris.

"That was the standard and it was very clear," he said. "So we said we can't do it. My concern now is that this (speed requirement) seems to be somewhat swept under the carpet."

When contacted, Clement said that to date he's received no complaints about the broadband speed, but he would check into things.

"They (MCN) are providing (service) pursuant to a bidding process that was conducted by FedNor and they have to meet the criteria FedNor set out," confirmed Clement. "If, in the course of our relationship with them they are not meeting the criteria, then that's something we'd be very concerned about. If I start to receive complaints from constituents, I would obviously follow up on those complaints with FedNor to ensure all of the terms of the contract are being met."

Clement said if there are legitimate reasons to do with topography or certain climatic conditions, these types of factors may provide "an out" for the provider.

"But generally they have to meet the terms of the contract," he said.

Clement pointed out that almost four years ago, only 20 per cent of the riding had broadband coverage.

"I'm led to believe that as of the end of this year, we will be very close to 80 per cent," he said of MCN's work to date. "Obviously, we've made some meaningful progress on this."

On the concern that the technology cannot provide enough speed if burdened with more and more customers, Clement said "the contractor should have thought of that when they bid on the contract."

He said he would "absolutely" look into the matter.

In the meantime, Morris points out that a lot of taxpayer money is being used to fund MCN projects.

Lynn Meahan, Clement's press secretary, said that since 2001, MCN has received $2.9 million in FedNor funding in support of eight information and community technology projects.

"The projects include large regional broadband projects involving 50 communities, satellite Internet support for over 100 small remote businesses, a pan-Ontario Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) conference, a website development program for small businesses and an ICT youth intern," she said.

A LIGHT TOUCH: Artist Col Mitchell paints with fluid acrylics and acrylic inks at Huntsville Place Mall on Friday evening. Mitchell is a member of the Huntsville Art Society, formerly Huntsville Art Crowd, which was hosting a Thanksgiving show at the mall last Thursday, Friday and Saturday. Local artists displayed and sold their works.

PHOTO BY CARLI WHITWELL

More areas get broadband service

Muskoka Community Network (MCN) has announced that four more remote rural areas in Muskoka now have broadband Internet service.

New places where MCN has brought the service include Springdale Park in Bracebridge, Minors Bay and South Bay in the Township of Georgian Bay and Brunel Road, near Whitehouse Road in Huntsville.

MCN is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to facilitating the implementation of telecommunications solutions for the regions of Muskoka and Almaguin.

It does this by working with and forming partnerships with both the public and private sectors.

MCN is currently working to bring broadband to approximately 15 more areas of Muskoka, with service being expanded in the Townships of Lake of Bays and Georgian Bay, as well as the Towns of Huntsville, Gravenhurst and Bracebridge.

Residents say they are noticing the difference with the new service.

"Downloading and sending large documents took an incredible amount of time," remembers Whitehouse Road resident Bill Cowan, a recipient of new service in his area. "(Now) the arrival of high speed in my neighborhood has made everything much easier."

To date, MCN has successfully coordinated the arrival of high speed Internet in 28 previously un-serviced locations, including the first nation community of Moose Deer Point.

Coverage is expected to improve as more towers come online.

Residents that want to determine if they are eligible for high speed wireless on this network can contact a Core Broadband reseller.

To find one visit www.corebroadband.ca and click on ISP'S (internet service providers).

Please also check http://www.mcnet.ca/projects/broadsched/ for more information.

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