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SERVICE ALBERTA

*Office of the Minister
MLA, Calgary-Varsity*

TOWN OF THORSBY
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March 27, 2017

His Worship Barry Rasch
Mayor, Town of Thorsby
PO Box 297
Thorsby, Alberta TOC 2P0

Dear Mayor Rasch:

As Minister of Service Alberta, I appreciate the opportunity to reach out to you personally about the work my ministry is undertaking with respect to SuperNet and the support of rural broadband in the province.

Our government understands the importance of maintaining vibrant and sustainable communities, and we know that community leaders like you believe that access to government services and quality internet are some of the keys. Keys to encouraging our youth to make a home in rural Alberta, retaining local skills and talent, attracting new industry and opportunity, and helping businesses to thrive. You have reached out to us about the importance of SuperNet and broadband through the recent Alberta Urban Municipalities Association (AUMA) and Association of Alberta Municipal Districts and Counties (AAMDC) surveys, fall conventions and resolutions, direct conversations with my department, and through correspondence with my colleagues in Cabinet. I thank you for the time you have taken to reach out, we have heard your concerns, and I can share that we are actively looking at how to provide support on these important issues.

Also recently, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) announced that broadband is a basic service that should be available to all Canadians, and both the federal government and CRTC are in varying stages of releasing broadband funding programs. We have spent time with both these groups, advocating on behalf of Albertans, and we support these important decisions. To that end, my department is already working with communities and Internet Service Providers (ISPs) across Alberta who are considering submitting applications for funding.

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At the same time as many of you are looking into municipal solutions or partnerships to enable better internet for your rural residents, the current SuperNet operating agreement with Axia SuperNet Ltd. is expiring on June 30, 2018. While SuperNet is not the internet, and primarily connects public sector sites in the province; it is also one of the networks used by municipalities and ISPs to bring internet into rural Alberta. We need to take action, and considering the valuable stakeholder insights shared with us, our government has been looking at options for moving forward. Those key considerations, and some important background to help you understand SuperNet and the decisions we face, can be found on the attachment I have enclosed.

Our government values open communication and recognizes that many communities are making efforts to improve broadband at home. While this process unfolds and we confirm government's direction, we want to caution municipalities on signing long-term agreements with ISPs. The landscape and arrangements could change and we want to position you for success. If you are considering a municipal partnership or agreement with an ISP, please contact our SuperNet Secretariat toll-free for guidance. They can be reached at 1-888-777-4010.

The government will be discussing our approach for the future of SuperNet and potential rural broadband supports in early 2017, and we will ensure you are aware of those decisions.

Thank you for your continued efforts on behalf of the people of Alberta.

Sincerely,



Hon. Stephanie McLean
Minister of Service Alberta

Attachment – SuperNet Municipal Backgrounder

cc: Christine Burke, Town Manager, Town of Thorsby

Honourable Deron Bilous, Minister of Economic Development and Trade

Honourable Shaye Anderson, Minister of Municipal Affairs

Tim Grant, Deputy Minister, Service Alberta

Stephen Bull, Assistant Deputy Minister, SuperNet Secretariat, Service Alberta

SUPERNET: THE WAY FORWARD AND MUNICIPALITIES

We know that community leaders and Albertans across the province believe that enabling broadband is key to ensuring vibrant and sustainable communities where businesses can thrive. We also know that many internet service providers (ISPs) in rural Alberta count on SuperNet today to deliver internet services to residents and businesses – and as we move forward – we’re working to ensure those services remain available to ISPs and municipalities alike.

On June 30th, 2018 the current SuperNet operating agreement with Axia SuperNet Ltd. expires. In light of the challenges facing SuperNet today, and considering the insights provided by our stakeholders - including municipalities - the Government of Alberta (GoA) has been reviewing options to move forward:

- ✓ Job 1 is ensuring service continuity for our indigenous offices, municipalities, public sector schools, hospitals, libraries and government facilities;
- ✓ While the GoA is not directly responsible for the delivery of internet services to rural Alberta, we must also continue to support ISPs who use the SuperNet today to deliver internet to Albertans, particularly in our rural and remote areas;
- ✓ We must examine ways to address the growing cost of SuperNet, while working to eliminate the issues and challenges raised to us by our many stakeholders;
- ✓ We must decide what role the new model for SuperNet should play in supporting rural broadband in Alberta, and what, if any, additional approaches should be considered to advance rural internet in the province – now and into the future; and
- ✓ We need to achieve these goals within our existing budget.

WHAT IS SUPERNET?

SuperNet is not the internet. It is a network of fibre optic cables, wireless towers, and electronics whose primary purpose is to digitally connect over 3,300 of our province’s hospitals, libraries, schools, government offices, and many municipal and indigenous offices, in 429 communities. SuperNet is also used by many independent ISPs to provide Albertans and businesses in your municipalities with access to the internet.

Like every network, SuperNet has evolved. It started 15 years ago with the GoA making an investment of \$193 million to construct and own a digital network to bring 402 rural and remote communities into the connected world. At that same time, Bell Canada (Bell) stepped up with \$102 million to enhance their existing network covering 27 urban centres within the province. The rural and urban networks became the SuperNet, and made Alberta the most connected province in the country.

In 2005, as SuperNet moved from construction into operations, the ownership arrangements and contracts for SuperNet were changed. Bell had invested more than \$300 million into completing the build of the rural network, and the GoA decided to give away ownership of that infrastructure, to Bell, in exchange for 10-years of free maintenance. Axia SuperNet Ltd. was also contracted to operate SuperNet.

The GoA now holds rights to use Bell’s fibre and wireless infrastructure until 2045. From 2005 to 2015 maintenance of the Bell-owned infrastructure came at no cost to the GoA. As of 2015 the GoA now faces annual maintenance costs of over \$15 million and will have spent more than \$300 million, in maintenance fees alone, before having the opportunity in 2035 to purchase only the aged rural infrastructure for \$1.

As a result of the 2005 change in SuperNet ownership, increasing maintenance costs, and ongoing challenges with today’s SuperNet model, we face some difficult decisions in paving the way forward.

WHO CAN I CONTACT WITH QUESTIONS?

The GoA will continue to work with all municipalities to ensure we maintain clear and open communication regarding SuperNet as we move forward.

All general inquiries should be directed to the SuperNet Secretariat and Rural Broadband Line: (Toll-Free) 1-888-777-4010.

