

January 29th, 2021

Presentation by the District of Kenora Unincorporated Area Ratepayers Association (DoKURA) to the Ontario Ministry of Finance Budget Consultations

Zoom Call

As a representative of DoKURA I thank you, Mr Chair, for the opportunity to present to your Committee with respect to Ontario's response to the global pandemic and plan for a strong economic recovery.

Three minutes to speak focuses the mind.

Our organization represents unincorporated areas of Kenora District, a very large geographic area from the Manitoba border north to Red Lake, east to near Ignace and south to the U.S borders in some sections of our territory. Our population would be in the vicinity of 25,000.

Residents include those who are trying to eke out an existence in a shrinking forest sector hammered by Covid-19 and softwood lumber. Many forest workers must find new work. Tourism is very important to us. Fishing and hunting lodges, as well as restaurants, bars and entertainment have been all but shuttered by the pandemic in the past year. The service sector is in decline at the moment. Many cottagers cannot spend time in their properties due to recent rules imposed to fight Covid-19.

DoKURA's focus in our presentation to you is internet because it is the means by which we conduct business, communicate, pay our bills, order food and other materials and connect with needed community services. It is how we will diversify our economy.

The Covid-19 pandemic has reduced our world significantly. As mentioned, employment has been reduced. Schools provide education at home and in the classroom. Health services often are offered by Zoom and telephone.

We do not have adequate internet infrastructure and services to function now and to adapt in to the future.

Inadequate internet infrastructure, access and price compound our problems.

Too many families do not have internet at all due to location or income. For others it is sporadic internet with speeds insufficient to do Face Time, Zoom or reliably access communication for business, personal needs and entertainment. Seasonal neighbours want to run their businesses remotely. They often cannot do so either for want of internet access or poor quality of service.

The phrase “we are surrounded by insurmountable opportunity”, interestingly, applies to us. Telcos do have fibre optic cables running along Highway #17 and Highway #71 but the service is not distributed. The cell tower system has improved but it does not reach all. Telcos offer cell phone based hookups but there are gaps and the service is expensive. One telco bought out a local internet provider using line of sight towers. These wireless internet towers were allowed to run down – less than 2 gigabytes of download and less than 1 gigabyte of upload on a good day. Steam power would be better. Two towers were shut down. No alternatives were offered.

The Federal Broadband initiative is helping to fund “shovel ready” projects. We are pleased to see that this has helped our neighboring First Nations a great deal. Consider Pikangikum First Nation as one example.

We have also partnered with a satellite-based firm to establish service in DoKURA. It may not be the full solution.

That we are more geographically distributed than First Nations remains an issue.

Telcos do not share their development plans. One confirmed that they have no intention to fill in gaps because there is no return on investment. Too much infrastructure is old. We hear of no upgrading offerings.

DoKURA and, probably other rural areas, need help to understand what is available in our areas. We need exchanges with telcos to draw out what can be done. There should be a plan for our area and others so that no-one is left out, connection and monthly costs are not significantly more than towns and cities and the internet systems remain up to date.

This is like rural electrification many years ago. We must have the facts. We need to know what telcos and other service providers can do. There can be no gaps. Quality internet, kept current at reasonable cost of installation and monthly rates should be a basic right.

This is an occasion when government has a valuable role to play

We put this before you as considerations in your budget planning

