Let towns, cities provide cheap, everywhere broadband

MICHAEL GEIST

In 1906, Adam Beck, a provincial cabinet minister from London, Ontario, introduced a bill that created the Hydro-Electric Power Commission of Ontario. Adopting "Power for the People" as his slogan, Beck vigorously fought corporate interests who wanted to keep electricity in private hands.

He pushed for a public utility that could provide all Ontario cities and towns with affordable electric power generated from Niagara Falls. His vision led to the world's largest public utility and dramatically changed the lives of rural Ontarians by bringing electricity to thousands of farms and villages.

A century later, Beck's fight is being replayed anew. Instead of electricity, the battle today is over high-speed wireless Internet access, as municipalities throughout North America who hope to provide "connectivity for their constituents" face tough opposition from private sector telecommunications companies.

The issue has attracted increasing attention in recent weeks, particularly following a highly publicized initiative by the city of Philadelphia.

Last year, it unveiled a plan to provide wireless Internet access throughout the city, citing the fact that a large segment of poorer areas of town were still without high-speed Internet access (popularly known as broadband).

The city's wireless solution was seen as a quick way to facilitate affordable broadband access and bring connectivity to public areas such
as parks and municipal buildings.

Verizon, a leading telecommunications provider, opposed the city's plans, arguing that the provision of Internet access should be left to the private sector. Verizon took its case to the state government, which nearly passed a law to block the municipal wireless initiative.

Following a public outcry, a compromise was reached that will allow the city to proceed but also established restrictions should other municipalities follow suit.

While the Philadelphia incident has received the lion's share of attention, similar battles are being fought across the United States. In fact, 14 states already have legislation restricting the ability of municipalities to offer telecommunications services such as broadband access. Moreover, an additional eight states are currently considering anti-municipal broadband legislation.

The spread of anti-municipal broadband legislation appears to be due primarily to aggressive lobbying campaigns by telecommunications providers. The providers argue that municipalities are ill-equipped to offer broadband services, ignoring the fact that many municipalities already provide a host of sophisticated services such as electricity, education, public transportation, libraries, and waste disposal.

Many of these services are viewed as public goods that are best provided to the community by the community. In an age where Internet connectivity is increasingly a prerequisite for banking, health care information, government services, and personal communications, ensuring that an entire community enjoys affordable access is a necessity, not a luxury.

The situation in Canada differs slightly from that in the United States. Due largely to the widespread availability of cable, the populations of most major Canadian cities enjoy access to broadband. In fact, according to a 2003 Statistics Canada study, 86 per cent of Canadians have access to broadband services (though a smaller number are actual subscribers).

While those figures are impressive, they tell only part of the story. Statistics Canada also reported that just 28 per cent of Canadian communities have access to broadband, suggesting that there is a significant digital divide between urban and rural communities in Canada.

The federal government sought to bridge this divide in 2001 when it launched its much-publicized broadband task force, which was asked to develop a strategy to ensure broadband availability to every Canadian community by 2004. It concluded that underserved communities need a link to the national network together with plans to connect public institutions, local businesses, and residents. The task force acknowledged that market forces alone were unlikely to solve the issue.

Sadly, Ottawa responded to the task force report by only launching several pilot projects, including Broadband for Rural and Northern Development, which brought broadband connectivity to 1,300 communities, as well as the National Satellite Initiative, which sought to develop satellite linkages to far north communities.
Notwithstanding these efforts, it is increasingly clear that realizing the dream of nationwide connectivity, harboured at the federal level by Industry Ministry led by David Emerson, will fall to local government.

Last week's budget from Finance Minister Ralph Goodale demonstrated that the issue no longer commands priority on the federal agenda, with no mention of broadband and scant references to the Internet and e-government services.

The private sector, meanwhile, will naturally continue to focus on economic return, prioritizing high-priced wireless access in coffee shops ahead of connecting smaller communities or public spaces in larger cities.

Several Canadian municipalities have already come to recognize the need for broadband leadership. The city of Calgary has installed wireless access in several downtown locations, while Kamloops, B.C. has focused on wireless access in public buildings.

The undisputed Canadian municipal leader is Fredericton, N.B., which identified the need to develop community wireless connectivity in 1999. That led to the Fred eZone, which today virtually blankets the entire downtown core with free wireless connectivity. The city has plans to expand coverage to the full business core along with all public spaces.

In the months ahead, look for many Canadian communities to follow Fredericton's lead. For smaller cities and towns, municipally-supported broadband may be the only realistic means of bringing connectivity to the community.

In larger cities such as Toronto and Ottawa, civic leaders will hopefully come to recognize the benefits of both providing affordable access to all its citizens and bringing connectivity to their many parks and public spaces.

These initiatives, which could play a pivotal role in providing e-government services, distance education, and tele-health, will not come without a fight. As Adam Beck learned 100 years ago, providing affordable, publicly supported services to the broader community often generates an electrifying shock to the system.

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Michael Geist is the Canada Research Chair in Internet and E-commerce Law at the University of Ottawa. He is on-line at http://www.michaelgeist.ca. The opinions expressed herein are personal and do not necessarily reflect those of the University of Ottawa.

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