



CASE STUDY – TORONTO

“Providing Free Wi-Fi to Residents in Low-income Communities”

www.toronto.ca/WiFi

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1. Project Background

Access to the internet is increasingly recognized by countries around the world as an essential tool for participation in modern democratic society. In Canada, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) has acknowledged that "broadband internet access services are vital to Canada's economic, social, democratic, and cultural fabric."¹

Although Toronto has good overall access to internet options, there is clearly a digital divide based on affordability. Data from [Statistics Canada](http://www23.statcan.gc.ca) (the national statistical office) shows that slightly more than 60 percent of Ontario households in the lowest income quartile have 'access' to broadband internet at home, meaning that it is available for purchase. In Toronto nearly 100% of households have 'access' but this refers only to the necessary infrastructure being in place. In practice, access depends on affordability.

According to Statistics Canada, 1 in 4 children and 1 in 5 adults in Toronto live in poverty (approximately \$40,000 for a family of four). Internet at current average prices is a significant expense for these low-income households. For example, a single person on social assistance receives up to \$706 per month to meet all their basic needs including food, shelter and transit. A monthly fee of \$75 for either home or wireless internet represents more than one-tenth of that payment, making it fundamentally unaffordable. [ACORN Canada](http://www.internetforall.ca) is an advocacy organization that has developed an 'Internet for All' campaign². Surveys of their membership indicate that internet is "extremely expensive" and often paid for by forgoing other household expenses.

The Covid-19 emergency has again highlighted the digital divide that exists in Toronto's low income communities. The closure of public places where many residents usually access free internet (libraries, schools, cafes etc.) has made it challenging to obtain benefits and services, many of which can only be accessed online. These closures have also created challenges related to online learning, and led to heightened feelings of social isolation as residents struggle to stay connected to friends and family who are not able to visit during the pandemic. For these reasons, the City initiated a pilot project to bring free internet to residents in low income communities. To do this, the City has partnered with technology and telecommunication companies who have offered to provide limited services at no cost to the city (details of the donation are noted at the attachment at the end).

¹ <https://crtc.gc.ca/eng/publications/reports/rp161221/rp161221.htm>

² <https://www.internetforall.ca/campaign>



2. The Digital Infrastructure Plan

Toronto is in the process of creating a Digital Infrastructure Plan (DIP). A primary objective of the plan is to enable a consistent approach for the City to evaluate digital infrastructure policies and proposals.

In January 2020, City Council adopted the following 5 working principles and vision statements as the guiding framework for the DIP³:

a) Equity and Inclusion

Digital Infrastructure will be used to create and sustain equity, inclusion, accessibility, and human rights in its operations and outcomes. Digital Infrastructure will be flexible, adaptable, interoperable and responsive to the needs of all Torontonians, including equity-seeking groups, Indigenous people, those with accessibility needs and vulnerable populations;

b) A Well-run City

Digital Infrastructure will enable high quality, resilient and innovative public services, and support evidence-based decision-making;

c) Social, Economic and Environmental Benefits

Digital Infrastructure will contribute to positive social, economic and environmental benefits by supporting the success of Toronto's residents, businesses, academic institutions and community organizations;

d) Privacy and Security

Toronto's Digital Infrastructure will operate in a way that protects the privacy of individuals in accordance with legislative requirements, and be safe from misuse, hacks, theft or breaches; and

e) Democracy and Transparency

Decisions about Digital Infrastructure will be made democratically, in a way that is ethical, accountable, transparent and subject to oversight. Torontonians will be provided with understandable, timely, and accurate information about the technologies in their city, and opportunities to shape the digital domain.

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<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2020.EX12.2>



In addition to adopting these principles as the guiding framework of the Digital Infrastructure Plan, City Council also directed the City Manager to ensure that any proposal submitted to the City is in compliance with all five of the Digital Infrastructure Plan Working Principles.

3. Evaluation of the Proposal to Provide Free Wi-Fi to Residents in Low Income Communities

A formal process to evaluate digital proposals is under development. In the interim, staff conducted a "soft" evaluation of the Free Wi-Fi proposal, applying the 5 DIP principles (refer to chart on the following page).

DIP Principle	Alignment with Principle	Diversion from Principle	Evaluation
Equity and Inclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> free internet access promotes inclusion, equity and accessibility focus on low-income communities geographic distribution of test sites 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some equity issues are present: not all qualifying locations can be provided with free Wi-Fi; residents within a building will receive varying standard of signal strength 	
A Well-run City	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> innovative approach (pilot project is nimble, allows flexibility, and quick decision-making; variety of test site characteristics (e.g. building heights and locations) will inform decision-making re. potential expansion for future phases partnership with telecommunication industry results in financially responsible short-term solution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> non-sequential project implementation carries unknown risks (e.g. implementation is being done in parallel with the PIA, and development of the sponsorship agreement) donation of technology and services (as opposed to procurement approach) could result in unknown medium- long-term service levels (e.g. implementation delays, maintenance) 	
Social, Economic and Environmental Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> positive social benefit (directly, for residents receiving free internet; and indirectly, from momentum that could arise to expand the program to benefit others) positive economic benefit (indirectly, by building confidence and trust in local government) negligable environmental benefit (neither positive nor negative) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> none identified 	
Privacy and Security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> legislative requirements will be met (user id and associated information is personal, collected with express consent of the user; collection falls under PIPEDA) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Any risks are low Due to emergency circumstances, the project is proceeding towards implementation without PIA being complete. While risky, parallels between this project and a similar 	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the solution deployed will meet industry privacy standards 	<p>one where a PIA was conducted are such that risk is minimal.</p>	
Democracy and Transparency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> information about the project provided via News Release and published on City web page 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the emergency situation which created a need for this project has meant that usual decision-making process has not been followed. Because of this, there has been no opportunity for public consultation and feedback, and minimal outside scrutiny of methodology. 	

The above evaluation indicated that the Free Wi-Fi proposal was in compliance with the 5 principles of the Digital Infrastructure Plan. Some aspects of the evaluation show that project is not perfect, however there are other tools that the City can use to address these issues. One example is an equity tool available to City staff to help identify and remove barriers and support best practices in the planning, development and evaluation of policies, services and programs.

Further support for this project comes from general direction provided by City Council in 2017 as part of the Toronto Poverty Reduction Strategy, to "expand digital access and literacy to ensure residents can effectively access programs and services online"⁴.

Low-Income Neighbourhoods

While the City encourages Torontonians to [stay home as much as possible](#), people who cannot afford home internet face barriers to receiving public health information, pandemic support services, emergency income supports and have difficulty staying connected to family and friends.

Donations from technology and telecommunications companies are going to help connect 25 large residential apartment buildings in low-income neighbourhoods with temporary free internet access for one year. Their donations include:

- hundreds of permanent mobile access point hardware and contribution of fees for some internet circuits from Cisco Canada;
- service management and maintenance from OnX Canada;
- fibre and hosting of core infrastructure from BAI Canada;
- fibre and single point of presence for internet from Beanfield Metroconnect; and
- volunteer labour provided by the civic tech community.

Bell will provide free Wi-Fi access in up to 10 of these low-income buildings for six months, waiving all installation and project management fees, to ensure all users can access the service.

Some buildings will be able to start using this free internet access in early May. Buildings will be identified for this service based on the size and location of the building, proportion of low-income residents, and residents without internet access and technology feasibility.

⁴ <https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2015/ex/bgrd/backgroundfile-84626.pdf>



Technical solutions and signal strength may vary throughout each building, although the aim is to provide enough coverage and strength to read news, submit online forms, use messenger apps, but not stream media/games.

For more information about this project please visit www.toronto.ca/WiFi