



Sturgeon County Broadband Initiative Phase 1 Public Communications Plan

Last Updated: March 15, 2022

Contents

Executive Summary2

Business Need and Communication Opportunity3

Goal.....3

Background.....3

Situational Analysis.....4

Audience and Stakeholder Analysis.....5

Strategic Approach7

Key Messages7

Executive Summary

Sturgeon County, along with its private sector partner, Canadian Fiber Optics Corporation (CFOC), continues to move forward with Phase 1 of the broadband initiative, which includes fibre installation to residences and businesses in hamlets, subdivisions, and business parks along the fibre route in the southwest corner of the County. The fibre installation route is being finalized and construction expected to start in the spring of 2022.

The over-arching goal is for Sturgeon County to be “a thriving community by enhancing quality of life for residents and increasing competitive advantages for businesses through the development of modern broadband and digital capabilities.” There are two short-term objectives to help move towards achieving this goal:

1. Sturgeon County will install fibre to the door of at least 90% of properties along the construction route.
2. Sturgeon County residents and businesses on the route subscribe to services offered by internet service providers (ISPs) located on the County’s fibre network.

The two objectives have similar audiences but with different needs. The focus of the communications will be to inform residents and business owners about the project as well as encourage people to sign up with one of the ISPs that co-locate on the County’s fibre network. Actual marketing of internet service is to be done by the ISPs.

The County needs to communicate with property owners, both residential and business, within the project area to provide project updates, timelines, and processes. This includes the following:

- Generating awareness and understanding of what is happening
- Providing information how those who will be served with fibre to the premises (FTTP) can sign up for services
- Providing information how those who are within the Phase 1 area but who are out of scope of this project can pay to get access
- Providing information to those who are out of scope of this project who are not able to get access or who are unwilling to pay for access how they will indirectly benefit from the transition of customers from wireless services to the fibre network, as well as other opportunities to improve their internet service

The County recognizes that residents and businesses outside of the project area will have questions about when the broadband strategy will be expanded to their area. Therefore, at all times during the project period, the County will ensure messaging acknowledges these questions and outlines the process for consideration of next stages.

Although messaging will be adapted according to the audiences, similar tactics will be used for the primary and secondary audiences:

- Website – including project updates and internet service provider listings
- Direct mail of invitations, letters, and other communications materials
- Open houses for project information updates and ISP sign-up sessions
- Signage in the Phase 1 area
- Newsletters, including the Economic Development newsletter and the broadband project subscription newsletter

It will also be important to keep key stakeholders informed, particularly Council and County employees likely to interact with the public, including frontline staff and outside workers. This strategy includes methods to communicate with these stakeholders.

Throughout the communications and marketing activities, the County will monitor feedback from key audiences and review and adjust messaging and tactics accordingly.

Business Need and Communication Opportunity

Sturgeon County continues to move forward on the broadband initiative, which includes fibre installation to residences and businesses in hamlets, subdivisions, business parks, and along the fibre route in the Phase 1 area, the southwest corner of the County. The County and its private sector partner, Canadian Fiber Optics Corporation (CFOC), are in the process of establishing the fibre installation route and anticipate starting construction in the spring of 2022.

Goal

Sturgeon County will be a thriving community by enhancing quality of life for residents and increasing competitive advantages for businesses through the development of modern broadband and digital capabilities.

Objective	Measurement
Sturgeon County will maximize subscription rates for those properties within scope for the project in the Phase 1 area (residences and businesses in hamlets, subdivisions, business parks, and along the fibre route) to ensure maximum benefit and optimize return on investment.	Analysis of subscription rates
Sturgeon County will have access to install fibre to the door of at least 90% of properties along the construction route.	Analysis of properties where fibre installed
Sturgeon County residents and businesses on the route subscribe to services offered by ISPs located on the County's fibre network.	Subscriber information from ISPs

Background

On December 8, 2020, Sturgeon County Council approved a new broadband strategy to improve internet access throughout the County. The County will start with a pilot project area in the southwest corner of the County and has approved funding of \$7.3 million in long term debt to finance the pilot project.

Constructing broadband infrastructure in rural areas is economically challenging due to low population density and large geographic distances between communities. Due to this economic challenge, private sector internet service providers are not providing sufficient service to rural areas, requiring Sturgeon County to make investments to improve internet service in the county.

It is not financially possible to bring fibre to the premises to all households and businesses in the county, and therefore priority has been given to denser areas (hamlets and subdivisions) where benefit can be maximized. The County has decided that in scope properties will not pay a service fee to connect in order to encourage uptake. Properties in the Phase 1 area but out of scope of this project can be connected through to the network through payment of the actual costs to connect (materials and labour). The County can facilitate discussions between landowners to ensure costs are shared among property owners who are interested in connecting to the network.

Those residents and business owners who do not connect to the fibre network are expected to experience improvements in wireless service. As in-scope customers transition from wireless service to the fibre network,

this will free up capacity on wireless towers, improving the speed and reliability of wireless service for other customers.

In November 2021, the County entered into a contractual arrangement with CFOC to design, build, maintain and operate a fibre broadband network in the southwest portion of Sturgeon County, with a shared financing and shared revenue model. This contract is for 5 years after the build is complete, with a 5-year renewal option.

CFOC will also provide internet services through its subsidiary company, Northern Lights Fiber. The County will also extend the opportunity for other ISPs to locate on the fibre network, providing residents and businesses with options for internet services.

As CFOC prepares for construction, the County will need to provide information to property owners about the construction route, why the route was selected, how those within scope can subscribe to service, and how those within the Phase 1 area but out of scope for the project can obtain access to the fibre network.

Overall, the following are key aspects of the project to be addressed in this plan:

- Resident communication regarding the project, including timelines, process, and construction route.
- Sharing of opportunities / working with property owners along or adjacent to the route but who are not in scope to work together to cost-share connection to the network.
- Promotion of internet services available through the newly constructed fibre network.

Situational Analysis

Strengths:	<p>Survey of residents and businesses show that the 97.7% of residents stated that internet access from the home is either very important or that they can't live without it.</p> <p>Through the pandemic, the importance of reliable broadband connectivity has been highlighted by the need for residents to work, learn, access health care services, conduct business, and communicate with friends and family virtually while respecting physical distancing directives.</p> <p>Funding for the pilot project has been approved by Council and no petitions were received regarding the proposal to borrow \$7.3 million to finance the project.</p> <p>CFOC has experience in providing broadband solutions in rural areas.</p>
Weaknesses:	<p>The approved budget does not cover the cost for installation to the entire Phase 1 area (approximately 52% of premises in the Phase 1 area are in scope). Denser areas have been prioritized in order to maximize benefit and increase return on investment.</p> <p>The unique approach to the project means there aren't lessons learned from others to incorporate in the plan and execution.</p>
Opportunities:	<p>Sturgeon County's project can be seen as "precedent setting" and can be the model for other rural municipalities to follow.</p> <p>Many ISPs reported that wireless technology is near its limits without going to 5G and installing hundreds of antennas (e.g. on power poles). There are no plans to move in this direction in rural areas.</p> <p>ISPs see Sturgeon County as good to work with, and do not see the County's processes or legislative regime/fees as a barrier to investment.</p>

	Potential to engage with First Nations and neighbouring municipalities to expand the network as a partner or as a service provider.
Threats:	Lower density and large distances between rural communities make it unfeasible to provide FTTP service to every household at this time. In scope residents and business owners will receive service upon subscribing while out of scope residents and business owners will need to pay to connect to the fibre network.

Audience and Stakeholder Analysis

Audience #1	<i>In-scope property owners along the construction route</i>
Primary, Secondary, or Stakeholder	Primary audience
Characteristics	Property owners; have indicated need for improved internet service
Drivers/Motivators	Improved internet service to address quality of life and/or business opportunities. Potential increased home or business value.
What do they know about this?	Project was announced in 2020; ongoing communication.
How do they feel about this?	Survey of residents and businesses indicated support for County investment in broadband infrastructure.
What do we want them to do?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow access to their property for installation of fibre • Subscribe to internet service

Audience #2	<i>Out of scope property owners along or adjacent to the construction route</i>
Primary, Secondary, or Stakeholder	Primary audience
Characteristics	Property owners; have indicated need for improved internet service
Drivers/Motivators	Improved internet service to address quality of life and/or business opportunities. Potential increased home or business value.
What do they know about this?	Project was announced in 2020; ongoing communication.
How do they feel about this?	Survey of residents and businesses indicated support for County investment in broadband infrastructure.
What do we want them to do?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand why they are not “in scope” for connecting to the network • Understand why they will need to “pay out of pocket” to connect to the network • Work with neighbours to share costs to connect to the network when construction begins, reducing their costs <i>OR</i> • Understand how existing internet service quality may be improved through reduced traffic even if they do not connect to the network.

Audience #3	General Public outside of Pilot Project Area
Primary, Secondary, or Stakeholder	Secondary
Characteristics	Property owners, have indicated need for improved internet service
Drivers/Motivators	Improved internet service to address quality of life and/or business opportunities. Potential increased home or business value.
What do they know about this?	Project was announced in 2020; ongoing communication
How do they feel about this?	Survey of residents and businesses indicated support for County investment in broadband infrastructure.
What do we want them to do?	Understand status of project, timelines, process Know where to look for information, updates Prepare for potential expansion including possibility of working with neighbours to connect to the service when construction begins, reducing their costs <i>OR</i> Understand how existing internet service quality may be improved through reduced traffic even if they do not connect to the network

Tactics: The following tactics apply to all audiences.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital: website, social media • Media Release, Newspaper ads • Direct mail (<i>except audience #3</i>) • Open houses – project information and ISP sign-up sessions • Signage • Newsletters including Ec. Dev. newsletter (for businesses). Broadband Project newsletter.

Audience	Sturgeon County employees, particularly frontline staff and outside workers who may interact with public
Primary, Secondary, or Stakeholder	Secondary Audience
Characteristics	Interact with public regularly
Drivers/Motivators	Need information to relay to public
What do we want them to do?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help answer questions, direct public as required • Direct public to appropriate resources for more information
Tactics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Email to frontline staff • Intranet post, updates

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Information/ key messages to managers, supervisors of frontline and outside workers
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Audience	Sturgeon County Council
Primary, Secondary, or Stakeholder	Stakeholder
Characteristics	Elected officials, Project decision-makers
Drivers/Motivators	Vested interested in the success of the broadband initiative
What do we want them to do?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue support for the project Provide direction on key decision points Communicate about project to residents and businesses Direct residents and businesses to Administration for complex questions and inquiries Advocate to other orders of gov't, other communities
Tactics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meetings (including Council, COW, IBC) Briefings, email project updates

Strategic Approach

Sturgeon County is taking a unique and innovative approach to address the digital divide in rural areas and this is an exciting opportunity for property owners, businesses, and residents located along the route to have internet service comparable to urban centres.

It is important to have as many properties as possible along the route agree to the installation, even if they don't subscribe to the service. That said, it is also important to have as many people subscribe to services from the ISPs that co-locate on the network as success of the pilot project will help determine how to approach expansion of service in the balance of the county.

Communications and marketing materials will focus on the benefits of participation (construction and subscription) and will be exciting and engaging. This will include information open houses for both construction and for promoting ISP sign up, allowing people the opportunity to ask questions and learn more about the project.

Another key aspect is the need to communicate early with those who are not in scope for connection to the network so that they can either make arrangements with neighbours, or can make informed decisions about other services (e.g. wireless or satellite).

There is also need to recognize residents and businesses outside of the project area will have questions about when the broadband strategy will be expanded to their area. Therefore, at all times during the project period, the County will ensure that messaging acknowledges these questions and outlines the process for consideration of next stages.

Key Messages

- Property owners and residents will enjoy an increased quality of life for residents through a faster and more reliable internet, which can be leveraged to support improved schooling, working, entertainment, security, and health.

- Businesses will enjoy an increased competitive advantage by leveraging a faster and more reliable internet to support new work models, allow innovation, and better support customers.
- Allowing construction of broadband “to your door” can help increase the value of your property.
- Out of scope properties can connect to the fibre network at their own expense; these costs can be mitigated by partnering with neighbours who also want to connect.
- Subscribing to one of the ISPs located on the County’s network gives you access to internet service comparable to urban centres.
- Sturgeon County’s model allows for multiple ISPs to co-locate on the County’s network, giving residents and businesses a choice of providers that can deliver high-speed, reliable internet service, with the potential of bundling with other services.