

Broadband calls swamp county

Rural residents eager to tap Internet expansion

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County headquarters has been swamped with phone calls from rural residents eager to sign up for the new high-speed Internet service being rolled out this summer.

A new customer service hotline - (966) 841-6001 - has been opened up by the broadband service contractor Xplornet (Barrett Xplore, Inc.) to take all future phone inquiries after the county switchboard in Cobourg received

a flood of calls.

"If people are interested in broadband, they can call this number and be put on the waiting list," county CAO Bill Pyatt said. "They can also find out what the schedule is for broadband coming to their area."

Mr. Pyatt said the county expects to sign the final contracts with the province this week to access the \$976,833 obtained through the Rural Connections Broadband Program. As this will be about \$200,000 more than the final

successful tender awarded to Barrett Xplore, Inc., of New Brunswick, the county plans to use the extra money to expand the coverage area in Northumberland.

"Barrett Xplore will be putting up a minimum of 10 new towers," Mr. Pyatt said, "but they will put up whatever they have to in order to guarantee coverage."

The extra funds could expand coverage of the new network from 90 per cent to 95 per cent of rural Northumberland north of Highway 401.

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High-speed access hotline established for county residents

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Bob Davie, general manager of Barrett Xplore, told The Independent that engineering work to construct the new network will likely start in late April and be completed by the end of the year.

"We want to start as soon as weather permits," he said, "because every day counts in lighting up the subscribers."

Mr. Davie said the new service will be a mixed network - fibre optic cables piggy-backing on Hydro One network's spare capacity, linking each of the broadcast towers. The towers will then deliver a wireless signal to a small receiver on the rooftop of each subscriber's home and then transport the signal by CAT 5 cable into that person's computer.

Monthly fees will vary according to the type of service purchased: \$30 monthly for a 0.5 megabyte-per-second service, \$40 for a medium 1.5 mbps; \$70-80 for a large 5 mbps service. A super service for companies would cost about \$150 a month.

"The broadband service will be of DSL quality," said Mr. Davie, adding that Barrett Xplore may face some challenges getting a signal "over the odd hill or through a row of dense trees."

The county's rolling terrain and significant tree cover, combined with relatively low population density, have discouraged other major Internet providers from servicing the area. As a result, many residents and businesses either have no Internet access, or are restricted to slow dial-up connections. Noted artist-organic farmer Lenni Workman and her partner Brad Francis, a veteran scenic painter on major movie productions have experienced Internet problems. Mr. Francis keeps a computer hooked to high-speed service in Toronto for his own business, then travels between city and country.

"He won't bring his computer home to the farm because the dial-up is so slow and unreliable," Ms Workman said. "As we are both self-employed, it's been very difficult making do

with dial-up. Broadband will make a big difference to us."

When Ms. Workman has completed one of her still life paintings on commission, she likes to send an image to her client to let them know it has been completed.

"But I have to find some other way to do it because it would take hours on my dial-up service," said Ms. Workman, celebrating 27 years as a professional artist.

Her works are displayed exclusively in Toronto at the Roberts Gallery and in Ottawa at Gallerie St. Laurent Plus Hill, but she cannot even host her own website showcasing her paintings. That has to be done through a communal website of the Spirit of the Hills artists' group at www.spiritofthe-hills.org.

"It would be great to have my own website as well, once the broadband service gets here," said Ms. Workman, who runs her organic farm in the summer and paints throughout the winter.