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Cumberland and Colchester Counties to Collaborate on Internet Improvements

Cumberland and Colchester counties have an ambitious vision to make their region one of Canada's most digitally connected rural places. The municipalities have entered into a formal collaboration and are seeking compatible internet service companies through a request for expressions of interest issued on the 24th of May.

The *Request for Expressions of Interest for a Rural Broadband and Connected Communities Collaboration* is timed to align with Develop Nova Scotia's call for applications to receive funds from the Nova Scotia Internet Funding Trust. The Province has designated \$193 million to contribute toward projects that bring highspeed rural broadband access to underserved areas in Nova Scotia. The first slate of projects will begin in 2019.

"This is a top priority for both of our Councils" says Colchester Councillor Tom Taggart "both for quality of life and economic reasons. We need to get this done." World Bank research has shown a strong correlation between rural prosperity and the availability of broadband, as indicated by economic activity and property values.

Taggart serves on a joint Colchester-Cumberland Internet Improvement Committee along with fellow Councillor Michael Gregory and Cumberland's Warden Al Gillis and Deputy Warden Joe van Vulpen. The Committee is rounded out with each county's Chief Administrative and Economic Development Officers.

Deputy Warden Joe van Vulpen acknowledges that communications networks are not typically areas of municipal service. "We've chosen to seek private partners," says van Vulpen, "We want this to happen as soon as possible, so we're looking to the experts to design it and to Develop Nova Scotia to oversee the projects."

"We're stepping up to make sure every part of our counties gets top notch internet options that will take us into the future as an excellent place to live and work." added Cumberland Warden Gillis.

The Cumberland-Colchester request for expressions of interest is open to companies that have prequalified as suppliers with Develop Nova Scotia (DNS). It aims to select an applicant to the DNS process for the municipal partnership to endorse. Following the selection, to take place by 14 June, the counties will negotiate terms of their support, including the possibility of financial contributions in exchange for immediate and future services on the network such as community Wi-Fi. Federal funding for this project is also being sought.

"The levels of coverage and service of the Develop Nova Scotia projects will meet our immediate needs," says Cumberland Community Economic Development Officer Michelle Byers, "but our vision is that 100% of our geographic area will be served by a state-of-the-art continuously upgraded network."

Byers' Colchester counterpart, Mark Austin, explains that reliable, affordable, highest-speeds internet access is an essential starting point. "But to attract and keep people and businesses we're also striving for the best rural mobile and capacity for internet-of-things uses such as smart agriculture and coming 5G applications."

Colchester Councillor Michael Gregory emphasized that one of the criteria the municipal partnership will use to select a collaborator is each respondent's strategy to respect and work with existing internet companies based in Cumberland-Colchester. "Our vision is to create a competitive and collaborative

environment. This is important to us.” says Gregory. Additional projects may be facilitated by requests for proposals open to all companies, including those not on the current DNS supplier list.

The full Request for Expressions of Interest for a Rural Broadband and Connected Communities Collaboration with the Municipalities of Cumberland and Colchester Counties can be found on each county’s official website (<https://www.cumberlandcounty.ns.ca> and <https://www.colchester.ca/tenders-proposals>).

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