

Motions on Notice

BROADBAND ACCESS IN RURAL B.C.

(continued)

B. Bennett: It's my pleasure to rise this morning and speak in support of my colleague's motion. I'm going to turn the motion around a little bit because although it is important that the House recognize the importance of access to broadband technology in the rural parts of our province, I think the House actually does recognize the importance. I think this government recognizes the importance. I think the greater challenge may in fact be helping folks who live out in the rural areas of the province to understand the benefits to them — for their future, for their children and for their grandchildren — of expanding access to broadband technology.

We have the Premier's Technology Council, which has done a lot of work. The CEO of the Premier's Technology Council, Mr. Mutter, has travelled around the province and has gathered information from people about what their needs are in terms of broadband technology. We have a ministry now — a new ministry as of 2001 — the Ministry of Management Services, which has done a lot of good work in terms of developing policy around the expansion of broadband technology in rural B.C.

We've developed, I think, some really useful alliances to help move the project forward. In particular, in the Kootenay region the Kootenay caucus, made up of the four Kootenay MLAs; the Ministry of Management Services; and Telus have entered into an alliance whereby we are able to deliver access to broadband technology to several of our larger communities — around a dozen of our larger communities — in the Kootenay region.

Back to my original comment that I think the greater challenge may in fact be helping people who live out in rural B.C. understand what an enhancement or an increase in access to broadband technology can actually do for them. Recently in my riding of East Kootenay, there were some meetings held by some of the local mayors and the regional district of East Kootenay who are in favour of expanding access to broadband technology. What they found was that there wasn't a full appreciation of what this technology can mean to us.

Let me just state very briefly some of the benefits. I won't state all the benefits, but some of the benefits. One of the benefits is that if there is broadband technology available in rural areas of the province, the folks that we call lifestyle immigrants — those folks who move from Vancouver and from the Okanagan and from the east and, in fact, from around the world who want to live in the interior of B.C. in the mountains, because of the lifestyle amenities available to them there — are much more encouraged to do so if they have broadband technology available to them.

There are folks that make their living on the Internet and can do business from New Denver or from Invermere or from Fernie just as easily as they can from Toronto or Vancouver or Berlin if they have that technology. Those folks tend to build nice houses and pay large property taxes, so there is a benefit there.

There is also a benefit in terms of health care. We're just getting started with telehealth projects in the province. We already have a couple going in the East Kootenay, and that can be expanded with more access to broadband technology. Just one really interesting example is the way that pictures, X-rays, can be taken in the small clinics in rural areas, and those pictures can be read in a regional hospital such as in Cranbrook or Kelowna or even in Vancouver with the use of this technology.

Education — another huge potential benefit for the use of this technology. We're finding that many of our schools are losing students. Enrolment is declining. It's very difficult in a place like Elkford, for example, to teach grade 12 or even grade 11 physics. With broadband technology, the students who want to take grade 11 or grade 12 physics or chemistry can actually stay in their classroom in a small community like Elkford and be taught by a very qualified teacher from a larger centre such as Cranbrook, Kelowna, Vancouver or wherever the case may be.

Another ancillary benefit that comes with that, which was pointed out to me the other day by the Kootenay school trustees association, is that if you in fact have several small schools and a few students in each school that would like to take these high-level technical courses, you can actually keep one teacher in the school district in a rural school district to teach that group of students their grade 11 chemistry, physics or math and do it with having the teacher right there in the region by the use of this technology.

There are many advantages to having it. I hope that as time goes by, we can help people in the rural parts of the province — including my own part in the Kootenays — to understand that this is a benefit that is going to assist everybody, including students and seniors, and has the capacity to actually increase our tax base.

W. McMahon: Hon. Speaker, actually, I would like to defer to my colleague who is wanting to speak. I was going to close debate.

H. Bloy: Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I've just re-entered the House.

The technology sector is so important for rural communities so they can connect with the world. There are now so many businesses that are moving out of the large urban areas where they're working, I will say, in home-based

industries and being able to carry on their business. But they need this broadband technology to make it work, so I fully support this.

W. McMahon: I am pleased to have heard previously the strong support for this motion in the House.

Technology is a wonderful commodity as we move forward, and we've heard, even today, how important it is to the province. I think that British Columbia's rural communities benefit immensely from it. We all know that in rural B.C. we have some of the best quality of life and affordable living standards anywhere in the world. My colleague from the East Kootenay was referring to that just a few minutes ago. I think we know how important it is to balance our professional careers with recreation and a comfortable place to live.

Many people prefer rural to urban centres, so it is important that they have the same tools they need to start a business or to expand their education or even their business. Having broadband Internet expand to rural and remote locations is a key element to make this happen. With that, Mr. Speaker, I ask that the motion now be passed.

Motion approved.