

## BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE IN THE KOOTENAYS

**B. Suffredine:** I want to speak today about our efforts to bridge the digital divide. Now, in the Kootenays — and I'm not sure how many people realize this — getting things like Internet access, cell service and those kinds of things is much more difficult in steep terrain with mountains. They require line-of-sight types of technology that broadcast.

When I was elected in 2001, one of the commitments that we made as a party in the *New Era* document was to work to extend high-speed broadband Internet access to every community in British Columbia through wireless technology, cable, phone lines and fibre optics. Our goal was to use public assets and our bargaining power as government to encourage expansion of Internet connectivity to all of British Columbia.

Many people know the value of high-speed connections, but there are still many people who actually struggle with things like e-mail and computers in general. I know many people — my wife included, I think — who don't know why it's so valuable to a small community, and they don't understand why a high-speed connection makes a difference. Communities in the heartlands often feel left out of the mainstream for many reasons. Major businesses like manufacturers often choose locations in larger centres simply because they're able to operate in those larger centres where they can connect with other people and other large businesses. People like writers, architects, engineers and consultants also have traditionally found that they need to be in those large centres in order to be able to do the work they do and to stay in touch with their employers.

The age of technology lets people like professionals do their work from home on a contract basis. For example, an engineer can design a bridge and send that work in on a disk or take it in and present it. The overhead is low when you work from home, and the presentation can be sent electronically or taken in and presented in person. Now, professionals like that, if they do work on that basis, can actually have a nicer lifestyle and can make a higher profit. Because they do their work on a contract, it takes into account the heavy costs they would otherwise have had. They can save the people they traditionally would have worked for the high overhead of a downtown office tower. People like artists have always found that marketing their products is difficult, because they need to be in a major centre in order to promote their work or spend huge amounts on advertising. Production and sale of an individual piece of art has never really been very practical, and it's difficult to spend that kind of marketing money.

The Internet makes a change to all of that. Creating a webpage can be done for a relatively modest cost. Products for sale can be posted easily by a picture on the Net and without high cost. People searching the World Wide Web only need to type in the product name they're looking for, and they can find it almost anywhere in the world. There are plenty of examples of businesses run from small communities. Typically in my region, I know, bed-and-breakfasts and back-country tour operators already run them — and artistic works, restaurants, campgrounds and those sorts of things.

You can buy almost anything on the Net these days. You can buy a car, or you can buy stocks, airplanes, pumps, parts and electronics — just to name a few. One of the unique things that's actually running in my riding is in a place called Crescent Valley. Many people may not know where it is. It's halfway between Nelson and Castlegar. There's a little company that makes casket furniture. This may sound a little morbid, but they actually make things like tables and chairs and other things that work on a theme of all being similar to caskets. They market that internationally on the Net. I don't know exactly what their sales are, but it's interesting that a unique little business like that is running in a small community.

**B. Bennett:** It's a dying business.

**B. Suffredine:** It's a dying business, as my friend from the East Kootenay says.

There's somebody up in the Edgewood area that makes herbal medicines. At this point, they aren't going to be able to market that on the Net very easily, but they will soon. The mayor's wife in Creston is starting to sell, over the Net, the custom-made porcelain dolls that she's making.

We began to expand access through schools with a concept called PLNet, and that actually didn't work out as well as we wanted. We developed a new strategy, and that was designed to say that we as government should aggregate the demand and have government be the purchaser of a number of connections. We do the contract to purchase connectivity, and we supply a public point of access in a number of communities around the province. Now, the idea is that members of the public can use that access, and local groups can then buy access through it and distribute the access they get.

On April 16 a new partnership was announced, and as a result, we have agreement from Telus to provide 11 new points of access to communities in the Kootenays. From those points of access, local community access providers like the Columbia Mountain Open Network will be able to build those last-mile solutions. This is the first step to full access for people in small communities. It will take time to complete the information highway, but we're getting the roadbed in place so people can build their access to it. Little places like Kaslo, Edgewood

and Wynndel are just a few examples of places that are going to love to have that access.

Bridging the digital divide is extremely important to the Kootenays. I hope all members will continue to support those efforts.

**B. Bennett:** Thanks to my colleague from Nelson-Creston. The Kootenay-Boundary region has been in a position to exploit the opportunity that the province has helped us obtain, along with the assistance of Telus, partly because we have a unique organization that helps us in this area, called CMON. That's the acronym, which stands for Columbia Mountain Open Network.

Columbia Mountain Open Network is an organization that's funded from the Columbia Basin Trust, and again, we're fortunate in the Kootenay area to have the Columbia Basin Trust. I suppose we get those benefits because in our region, many years ago, they flooded many of our most fertile valleys so that B.C. could have the electricity that we need to power our economy and provide the services to all British Columbians that we all want. Some of the benefits from that flooding and the creation of those hydroelectric developments flow back to the region, and we think that's fair and that's a good thing. Some of those resources have been used to fund Columbia Mountain Open Network, or CMON as they like to be called.

Between the Premier, in particular, the Minister of Management Services, the Kootenay caucus and also the regional districts and the mayors, over the last three years and in particular over the last two months we've been able to put together a program that my colleague talked about in some detail. I won't talk about it in detail. It's a program that's going to deliver 11 hubs, essentially, to our communities in the Kootenays and provide the fibre backbone right up to the edge of these communities from which CMON and the communities will then develop the last mile — or the community networks — to take the service into homes, businesses, hospitals and schools.

There are a number of ways our communities will make use of this opportunity. Again, my colleague has talked about some of the commercial opportunities. I wanted to just mention that in terms of health care, we will have more opportunity for telehealth in our hospitals. We have one telehealth project right now in the East Kootenay Regional Hospital that involves connecting the emergency room in the regional hospital in Cranbrook with VGH so that our physicians and nurses can take advantage of the specialized knowledge and expertise that exists at the Vancouver General Hospital.

We're also going to be able to read X-rays from remote locations. If you have an X-ray taken in a little clinic in Elkford or the clinic in Sparwood or Kimberley or in the hospital in Invermere, you'll be able to — with this high-speed broadband Internet — read the X-ray picture at the regional hospital and have

the specialists there help with the diagnosis. So it has real practical and positive impact.

Education is another area that will be able to exploit this opportunity to use this high-speed broadband Internet. I know that in some of my communities and the communities of my colleague in the West Kootenay, we have some fairly small high schools, and yet there are some excellent students. Sparwood, for example, often leads the Kootenays in terms of their performance at that high school. But the classes are small because the population is small.

What this high-speed broadband would be able to do is allow some of the students, some of the smaller classes — let's say grade 12 physics that might not have so many students in it — to actually take the grade 12 physics class from either one of the schools in Cranbrook or possibly someplace else in the Okanagan or wherever — wonderful opportunities to use this technology.

The third thing I just want to mention briefly is that we have many attractive communities in the Kootenays. In fact, all of our communities are very attractive in the Kootenays, and people from around the world have discovered them and would like to live there. But one of the limitations, basically, is that you don't have the technology there to connect with the rest of the world. This high-speed Internet broadband service will allow someone from Europe or from the States or from other places in Canada to locate to a small community like Fernie or Nelson, or even a smaller community like Slocan or Jaffray, and basically connect with the rest of the world and do their business right from one of the most beautiful areas on the face of the earth.

So, again, it is my pleasure to support the member's statement on this matter, and I want to thank the staff at Management Services for all the work that they did — the Premier, the minister. And I want to thank Telus for bending over backwards to help us make this happen as well.

**B. Suffredine:** I want to thank the member for his remarks and for his efforts in all of this. One of the things that was initiated after we began was something called the Kootenay caucus, and my friend sits as the chair of that. I know he has worked hard on many of the things that have been brought forward. It's been remarkable that as the Kootenay caucus.... There have been a number of successes that come from the fact that when you get members of the Legislature from four different ridings in the province that can all agree on where the priorities lie and how to achieve them, how effective you can be over trying to be competitive and trying to be parochial from town to town.

There has been a great deal of progress made on major projects like trying to get expansion to the Cranbrook Airport, the digital divide and a number of others around the region. I'm looking forward to perhaps some success on some transportation issues like the Needles bridge in the near future. All of those

result solely from the efforts of people working together and under the leadership of the chair. It's been very good.

My friend mentioned the opportunities in telehealth. Those are great opportunities, and they're going to bring specialized medicine right into small communities. But there are also opportunities, as he said, for schools. In addition to small schools, the ability of streaming video.... Of course, people might say: "Well, you can see things on television. What's the difference between television and the streaming video you get off the Net?" The difference is the interactive nature of being able to actually participate in a lecture that might be going on in some place like Toronto or Vancouver or anywhere else in the world, and having students be able to put in questions and get answers directly from people that are some of the best experts in the world.

Participating in those specialized educational opportunities can benefit all the schools all around the region from high schools to places like Selkirk College, College of the Rockies, Kootenay School of the Arts. All those efforts are a little step forward, one step at a time, because of the steady efforts of all the members from all around our region.

Thank you to the member for his kind thoughts. I thank him, as well, for his continued efforts, which I know are going to continue until every mile of the Internet highway is in place.