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New broadband funding fast tracks high-speed Internet for Island

The announcement of a \$485,000 contribution by the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation (NOHFC) to the Blue Sky Economic Growth Corporation will assist in developing the infrastructure to deliver broadband services to nearly 30 communities on the Island.

"More efficient connectivity means Northern Ontario communities and residents are able to tap a whole new range of opportunities in education, health care, culture and business," said Northern Development and Mines Minister Michael Gravelle. Minister Gravelle is also chair of the NOHFC, which was holding its 20th anniversary meeting at Gordon's Lodge in Gore Bay.

"We want our Island entrepreneurs and public agencies to have a level playing field when it comes to competing and transacting in today's face-paced world," said Algoma-Manitoulin MPP Mike Brown, who joined the minister in making the announcements.

"This project will ensure that residents of Island communities will all benefit from the expansion of economic opportunities that access to broadband services will provide," said Blue Sky Economic Growth Corporation general manager Susan Clark. Ms. Clark noted that the introduction of broadband services will take place over the next few years, but cautioned against asking for a precise timetable. "We are going to do it right," she said. Ms. Clark also alluded to the possibility of increasing cellular services on Manitoulin.

The Blue Sky Economic Growth Corporation will be partnering with Omniglobe, a corporation with a world-wide expertise in bringing broadband access to remote areas, in order to implement broadband services on Manitoulin.

Nigel Maund, Omniglobe vice-president of business development, was on hand to outline the first stage of the project. The company will be meeting with First Nations and municipalities over the next little while to ensure that the implementation will mesh with the needs of those communities.

"This wouldn't happen without the absolute support of the NOHFC," he said. "Once we have built the high-speed network, then we can start to develop the applications."

Experience has shown that the introduction of broadband services have acted as a catalyst, noted Mr. Maund. "In supporting this project, NOHFC has taken the long-sighted approach." He also stressed that the big question always asked about the implementation is always "When?"

"It is a big project," he said. "We are going to do it right."

"If they can do it in Africa," noted emcee and NOHFC member Carolyn Lane-Rock, "they can do it on Manitoulin."

Omniglobe has implemented a number of rural infrastructure programs in Asia and Africa, encountering much more difficult obstacles than those faced in rural North America.

Mr. Brown noted that the McGuinty government, through the NOHFC, has invested \$29.3 million to support 17 projects to enhance telecommunications infrastructure across the North. "This is in addition to our government's investment of \$15.9 million from October 2003 to December 2006 under the NOHFC previous technology program," he said.