

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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ICET SUPPORT HELPS SRD COMMUNITIES PREPARE FOR ‘LAST-MILE’ BROADBAND CONNECTIONS

COURTENAY – Internet connectivity - and especially high speed broadband – has become a key requirement for business and residents in communities of all sizes, including rural and remote communities. A new project supported by the Island Coastal Economic Trust (ICET) will build on previous work done in the Strathcona Regional District to address the digital divide that exists in the Island and Coast region.

There is a significant gap between broadband service levels in urban and rural areas in BC. Many communities within the Strathcona Regional District are identified by the federal government as not meeting basic service targets, if they have any service at all.

In 2017 the SRD developed a broadband strategy to address this issue and received more than \$30M in senior government funding to place subsea fibre optic cable around Vancouver Island and the south coast. This subsea fibre optic cable will create the opportunity for dozens of rural, remote and Indigenous communities to build out the last mile connections required to service business, organizations and individuals.

“We’re about to launch a project in eight of our communities that will assess their digital aspirations, economic development activities tied to broadband, and technical infrastructure solutions for those ‘last mile’ connections,” said Michele Babchuk, Chair of the Strathcona Regional District. “Those reports will then give us the information we need to attract service providers and greater infrastructure investment in last-mile connectivity, helping to create a more even playing field for rural and remote communities.”

The project will support community-based planning sessions, in eight SRD communities (Quadra Island, Cortes Island, Area A, Area D, Gold River, Tahsis, Zeballos and Sayward). This will include the deployment of a team of experts to each community, to assist with the determination of the optimal infrastructure requirements. The resulting strategies and action plans will ensure that new broadband connectivity is fully optimized for community development and economic diversification and growth.

ICET Chair, Josie Osborne noted that the linkage between economic development and broadband internet access is clear.

“Whether it’s people in the tech industry wanting to live in a rural community for quality of life, attraction of new business start-ups, or even basic expectations of residents, we know that high speed connectivity is becoming a requirement for communities to sustain themselves and grow,” she explained.

Building a diverse and sustainable economy.

By accessing high level expertise through the SRD, the project provides rural communities with a cost-effective way to develop the business case required for last-mile funding or investment from telecommunications providers. The project methodology will also serve as a template for other Regional Districts looking to undertake similar work.

“Knowing that bridging the digital divide is a strategic priority for senior governments, and anticipating significant funding availability in the near future, this project will position the SRD and its communities to take advantage of those programs when they launch,” explained Osborne.

The project is supported with \$30,000 in matching funding provided through the [Economic Development Readiness Program](#) (Broadband strategy funding stream). Work is expected to get underway shortly, with completion forecast for summer 2019.

About the Island Coastal Economic Trust

Created and capitalized by the Province of BC, the Island Coastal Economic Trust (ICET) has been at the forefront of economic diversification, planning and regional revitalization for the past twelve years.

ICET is independently governed by a Board of Directors and two Regional Advisory Committees which include more than 50 locally elected officials, MLAs and appointees from the Island and Coast. This exceptional team of leaders collaborate to set regional priorities and build vital multi-regional networks.

Through a community centered decision-making process, ICET has approved more than \$50 million in funding for over 190 economic infrastructure and economic development readiness projects. These investments have leveraged over \$270 million in new investment into the region creating more than 2500 construction phase jobs and 2600 long term permanent jobs.

A full overview of ICET can be found at www.islandcoastaltrust.ca.

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