Bridging the Digital Divide by Supporting Rural, Remote, and First Nations Communities Broadband Accessibility Through Coordinated Dig Once Policies

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Issue

Rural, Remote, and First Nations Communities have historically lacked access to reliable broadband connectivity. With broadband infrastructure becoming increasingly costly for communities with smaller populations and great distances between them, more efficient strategies are needed to ensure equitable access to reliable, affordable broadband services. While Ontario has made significant progress in broadband expansion, current policies do not fully mandate fibre deployment during public infrastructure projects, leaving these communities at risk of being underserved. Expanding the availability of conduit through Public-Private Partnerships (P3s) will enable telecommunications providers to more easily enter previously underserved regions. A coordinated provincial "Dig Once" strategy and mandate can significantly reduce future fibre deployment costs, especially when combined with infrastructure-sharing provisions benefiting these isolated areas.

Background

A "Dig Once" policy is designed to reduce the cost of broadband deployment by installing conduits (plastic pipes for fibre-optic cables) during public infrastructure projects. This proactive approach minimizes excavation and restoration costs, allowing fibre-optic cables to be added later without disruption. Embedding conduits in public works projects reduces the future costs of broadband installation, fosters competition among Internet Service Providers (ISPs), and accelerates efforts to close the digital divide.

Ontario has made significant progress in bridging the digital divide, particularly for rural, remote, and First Nations communities, through legislative actions and financial investments aimed at expanding broadband infrastructure. With a $4 billion commitment to close the digital divide by the end of 2025, the provincial government has introduced several key legislative measures to streamline broadband deployment and encourage innovative solutions.

The Getting Ontario Connected Act, 2022[1] and the Building Broadband Faster Act form the foundation to the provincial strategy of accelerating broadband expansion across Ontario. These legislative changes focus on removing regulatory barriers[2] and streamlining the permitting process[3] for broadband infrastructure projects[4]. By simplifying processes and promoting coordination between municipalities and telecommunication companies, these amendments have significantly reduced time and costs, particularly in underserved and remote communities.

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[1] Getting Ontario Connected Act, 2022, S.O. 2022, c. 9 - Bill 93

[2] Ontario Underground Infrastructure Notification System Act, 2012, S.O. 2012, c. 4

[3] O. Reg. 410/22: ELECTRICITY INFRASTRUCTURE - DESIGNATED BROADBAND PROJECTS

[4] Supporting Broadband and Infrastructure Expansion Act, 2021, S.O. 2021, c. 2 - Bill 257

Despite these advances, current legislation does not fully incorporate the 'Dig Once' concept, which could seamlessly integrate broadband infrastructure into provincial growth while reducing excavation costs. While advancements have been made, the absence of a mandatory, uniform provincial 'Dig Once' policy limits opportunities for future fibre deployment, particularly in geographically challenged areas where installation costs are a barrier. Without a mandated 'Dig Once' policy, Ontario risks higher long-term infrastructure costs, fragmented broadband expansion, and continued disparities in internet access[5].

To fully capitalize on Ontario's broadband investment and close the digital divide, it is essential that the provincial government considers the adoption of a comprehensive 'Dig Once' policy, further mandating conduit installation in public infrastructure projects, while continuing to support alternative connectivity technologies, such as the recent Ontario Satellite Internet (ONSAT) Program[6]. Further policy refinements are needed to ensure a cohesive and balanced approach to broadband expansion across all regions, improving efficiency and lowering project costs.

With the right legislative framework, Ontario will remain a leader in telecommunications deployment, ensuring all communities—especially those in rural, remote, and last-mile areas—are equipped with the digital tools they need to thrive.

Recommendations

The Ontario Chamber of Commerce urges the Government of Ontario to:

1. Establish a standardized provincial 'Dig Once' framework and mandate conduit and fibre installation in all public infrastructure projects, ensuring broadband infrastructure is proactively integrated, especially in rural, remote, and First Nations communities.
2. Strengthen and expand best practices for constructing telecom networks in rights-of-way, ensuring that municipal assets are protected through permitting and Municipal Access Agreements, while promoting streamlined and cost-effective broadband expansion across all regions
3. Continue to work with the federal government to develop and enhance financial tools that incentivize private-sector investment and reduce costs for broadband expansion, ensuring affordable and equitable access for underserved communities.
4. Continue to prioritize the deployment of alternative broadband technologies, such as satellite internet and fixed wireless, to connect communities where ground-based infrastructure is unfeasible.
5. Provide enhanced supports and resources to help municipalities streamline the dig once process, making infrastructure deployment more cost-effective, coordinated, and efficient.

[5] 2024 Northern Ontario Broadband Report, Blue Sky Economic Growth Corporation, 2024

[6] Ontario and Starlink to Bring High-Speed Satellite Internet to Remote Communities, Infrastructure Ontario, November 14, 2024