

Olds fibre-based network could be operational in 2010

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Widely known as one of Alberta's most progressive municipalities, Olds is on the verge of becoming Canada's first community totally connected with fibre-based services.

The services would be available to every home and business, says Joe Gustafson, chairman of the technology committee of the Olds Institute for Community and Regional Development.

The committee developed a vision for Olds with the creation of a connected community where citizens are intelligent consumers of technology and have established a culture of use, Gustafson says.

He says the plan is to make a community portal or a single port of service for e-commerce, secure service sites and e-markets.

"We want to make the advantages — such as voice over internet communications (VoIP), mass storage, virtual private networks and all of the attendance training and services — available for users."

Gustafson says when a residence is connected to the system it's estimated it will add \$5,000 to \$10,000 to the value of a home.

The project will ultimately provide service for telephone, Internet and television.

Similar networks have been established in a few United States communities.

In a best case scenario, Gustafson says the network will be up and running by the late summer of 2010.

He says committee members have discussed costs to connect at around \$120 to \$150 based on the average total cost people now pay for telephone, cable television and Internet connections.

The institute entered into a contract in March with a Calgary company — Fiopt Communication Services Ltd. — to plan, design and perform the engineering cost estimates of the installation of conduit and fibre.

The institute is the brainchild of six community organizations including the Town of Olds, and District Chamber of



Photo by RANDY FEDLER/Advocate staff

Whether online at home or working as a pharmacist, Joe Gustafson knows that the Olds fibre optic project is going to make the town a leader in community-wide, high-speed Internet access.

Commerce, Olds College, Olds Agricultural Society and society members Chinook's Edge School Division and Mountain View County.

The project will set Olds as a community that goes far beyond email or simple e-commerce.

The region is well positioned for the technological advances envisioned by the institute, Gustafson says.

The Community Learning Campus — a joint project of Chinook's Edge, the Town of Olds, the county, and college and others — has become a high-tech learning incubator with the support of Bell Canada and the development of the Bell e-Learning Centre.

Gustafson says better communications networks will help the people of Olds access the opportunities needed to thrive in the future economy.

Gustafson says if the project is successful, Olds will become the best place for small/medium enterprise specializing in information technology in Alberta.

The community will also be a model for the region in rural development.

Gustafson says it will help stop the brain drain and increase opportunity for youth.

"If you just keep 10 young

couples from leaving that means an average of 20 students for school, which is a class," he says.

It will increase home-based business, providing flex time opportunity and shift the types of employment opportunities.

It will also boost skilled employment opportunities and increase average income of the community overall. It will also retain and engage the retiring workforce.

The institute, Gustafson says, wants to ensure the community's future in terms of being connected to the information highway.

"Then the only thing that will limit you is your imagination," he says.

"We're trying to future proof our community.

"The ultimate goal here is we wish to have a 100 meg connection to every premise in our community to drive small and medium-sized business development.

He said the 100 meg figure is a huge number but no one knows how much future capacity will be required.

He said that band width will make it attractive for a business to look at Olds.

"It makes sense because why would you go to Calgary and pay \$40 a square foot for

a business when you can be in Olds for \$20?"

He said the advantage of the project is the ease at which multiple connections can be accomplished in the fast evolving digital world.

Gustafson said the time and money spent on meetings could be greatly reduced through video conferencing, which is being constantly refined and perfected through digital means.

And reduced driving benefits the environment.

"Imagine if you could get as much as 10 per cent of the population not having to drive in any one day," Gustafson says.

"We are in the design stages.

"We're trying to prove that putting a big broadband into a community is viable.

"We are still in the process of trying to get companies to light this project up.

"There's little point in putting dark (unused) fibre in the ground if no one is going to drive applications down it."

He said one of the design stage goals is determining how much it will cost.

"Even though it's taken us four years to get to this point we're very much in the development stage and how are we going to make it happen."

Bryan McIver, managing director of Fiopt Communication Services Ltd., of Calgary, is providing the consulting and network design services for the project.

He said there's one other project of a similar nature in British Columbia, but it's "kind of on the rocks now," he said.

"I don't think it's happening anywhere else in Canada," said McIver who recently worked on a similar project in Oregon.

"We've been hired to design the fibre roads in Olds," he said in explaining Fiopt's part in the project.

"There's a group of people in Olds who have had the foresight and the passion and had the diligence to stick with the project to raise the funds in the last four years."

Fiopt, which is 100 per cent Canadian owned, signed a \$235,000 contract with the institute last month.

The money came from a grant from the Rural Alberta Development Fund.

Two Fiopt advisors are well known in Central Alberta.

Former Red Deer South MLA and Alberta minister of science and innovation Victor Doerksen and City of Red Deer engineering services manager Gordon Stewart work in an advisory capacity, McIver said.

McIver said Olds will benefit because it will fill the need for many people's priorities.

"You ask anyone under 25 and where they want to live must have high-speed Internet access."

He said communities are looking at fibre optics as a vital need.

"Instead of people saying it's something that would be nice to have . . . it's something that communities realize is a necessity."

He said people who may have previously been forced to move to a large community like Calgary, Edmonton or Vancouver can now stay in Olds and run their business.

He said the savings to those people are magnified because no longer do they have to pay more for housing for example.

"They have a better quality of life in general," he said.

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