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High speed Internet coming to all of Saskatchewan

New cell phone towers to be built as part of plan

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REGINA -- High-speed Internet access will be extended to the farthest rural reaches of Saskatchewan within three years under a new \$129-million infrastructure plan, the provincial government vowed Wednesday.

SaskTel's high-speed Internet coverage will increase from 86 to 100 per cent, while 50 new cell towers will also be added to give 98 per cent of the population cellphone coverage, up from the current 96 per cent.

Premier Brad Wall compared the plan to "Saskatchewan's 21st century equivalent" of the storied last spike that completed the Canadian Pacific Railway.

"We want to make sure we can accommodate and be ready for all the growth in the province that we've seen and we expect over the mid-term and the long term, and that includes rural Saskatchewan," said Wall, who gave credit to the previous NDP government for past efforts to extend coverage.

The province is providing \$90 million to SaskTel for the work, while \$39 million is to come from the Crown Corporation's budget.

"It's going to be a very busy three years for the company," said SaskTel president and chief executive Robert Watson.

"When you think about it Saskatchewan is the geographical size of Texas and we've got over a million people to cover. It will arguably be the best network in the world when we finish this in three years and will give every person in the province access equal to almost anywhere in the world."

The work includes upgrading the "underlying rural backbone infrastructure" as well as an expansion of the existing CommunityNet high-speed network. SaskTel will partner with a satellite firm in order to provide high-speed Internet service to the most remote areas.

The expansion to cellphone coverage will help "infill" some of the dead zones where people lose service, Watson said.

For people in rural Saskatchewan still relying on dial-up, the improvements can't come soon enough, said Doug Steele, a Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities director from southwest Saskatchewan.

"You can spend hours in the evening (on the computer) just trying to access information that's coming through to you during the day," Steele said.

Reliable cellphone coverage is also an important safety issue for farmers out in the

field, he said.

"When you work in rural Saskatchewan at this point in time you're fairly isolated," he said, noting he often comes across spots on his own farm in the Gull Lake area where there is no service. "You're alone out there a lot of times doing your job."

The Saskatchewan Chamber of Commerce also applauded the plan for across-the-board high-speed access, saying that access to dial-up limits the ability of a business to reach new markets and suppliers.

"Whether a small business is selling local artwork or a bed and breakfast is offering a great Saskatchewan adventure; these businesses need to get online," said Steve McLellan in a press release.

Crowns Corporation Minister Ken Cheveldayoff said his office heard many concerns from people and groups troubled by the lack of high-speed Internet service or poor cell coverage.

He said expanding the service became a priority for the government so that small businesses, students and others could all be on "equal footing" no matter where they were located in Saskatchewan.

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