

Rural Internet Problems Still Exist



Workers climb up a Seaside Tower to install new equipment.

By Maurice Rees

Residents in rural areas of Cumberland and Colchester Counties will be envious to learn Eastlink announced a \$6.5-Million investment to improve internet service along the south shore and Southwestern Nova Scotia as it works in Rural Nova Scotia, bringing high speed Internet and other advanced fibre services to thousands more rural Nova Scotians.

Approximately 15 years ago Eastlink was given areas west of Halifax, while Cape Breton based Seaside High Speed was directed to provide services in Northeast, Central and Cape Breton Nova Scotia. Throughout the 15 year span thousands of Nova Scotians have complained about the non-reliability or lack of speed of the internet service provided to them. Trouble spots have appeared from one end of the province to another.

Earlier this summer Eastlink held several meetings with residents of south Cumberland, specifically in

the Advocate, Port Greville, Diligent River and Southamton areas. Many residents were hopeful improved technology and more towers would solve their problems.

On September 18th, this publication sent an email to four people at Seaside High Speed internet to get an update. Within hours, Parker Donham responded and with an exchange of several emails, he outlined how things are progressing.

Here is part of what he said, "The work will be completed by the end of November, and that is a deliberately conservative estimate. I don't want to get into specifics about which towers will get new equipment on which day, etc., because construction schedules are necessarily flexible, owing to weather, etc. Assembling that level of detail would require the people doing the work to take time away from doing the work. They have their hands full, so I try to limit my information requests. I have consulted the GANTT chart for the work, which is constantly updated, and end of November remains a good, conservative date for all the work in that area to be complete. I expect customers installations will begin by then.

Customers can expect to receive information about the speed upgrades once the system is in place. I think this usually takes the form of door-knockers, but I'm not 100 percent certain what method we will use in that area.

Currently no additional



There's a lot of equipment on top of a communications tower.

meeting with south Cumberland area residents, but Seaside would entertain requests from the groups who had invited them previously. His feeling was it would be best to wait until the customer installations are underway or even largely completed.

Donham clarified one point about the comparison between the upgrades announced to by Eastlink in south and southwestern Nova Scotia and the upgrades underway by Seaside. Both companies operate two very different networks: (1) a cable/fibre network that uses hard connections to customers' houses and that grew out of the old Cable TV systems, and (2) a fixed wireless network for very rural customers built under the province's Broadband for Rural Nova Scotia (BRNS) project that ran from 2008 thru 2013.

Seaside's cable system operates in Glace Bay, New Waterford, Dominion, Baddeck, St. Peter's, Louisbourg, and a few smaller nearby communities. Eastlink's cable system operates in Halifax Dartmouth, Sydney, and many small towns throughout the province. Over the last 2-3 years, Seaside carried out a self-financed program to massively upgrade our cable system, but that has no relevance to the rural customers served by our fixed wireless network.

The following information was provided by Parker Donham: Seaside (and Eastlink) built our fixed wireless systems under the BRNS program, which was intended to bring universal access to high speed internet throughout unserved areas of Nova Scotia. Government designed the program, in cooperation with RDAs, in 2007, when "high speed" was defined as 1.5 Mbps down and 0.5 Mbps up. This was before Netflix, Skype, streaming video, etc. It was an enormous improvement over dialup — 27 times faster in fact. But in 2016, with all the services available now, and all the devices connected in a typical home, it can feel pretty sluggish.

As part of BRNS, Seaside installed more than 350 network towers and "fill-in" poles. We connected more than 10,000 customers across rural portions of Cumberland, Colchester, Pictou, Antigonish, Guysborough, Inverness, Richmond, Victoria, and Cape Breton (CBRM) counties, along with parts of HRM. At 30,000 square kilometres, ours is one of the largest fixed wireless networks in the world.

In pursuit of the 100% goal, we were able to connect 99.8 percent of customers who requested service. In 20 cases, where the cost of providing service to a customer was deemed extreme, we were granted a ministerial exemption from the requirement to connect everyone.

A 1.5 Mbps system that is functioning perfectly is capable of streaming Netflix at

low resolution, but it bogs down if the household has several devices in use at the same time. As a result, the CRTC recently re-defined "high speed" as meaning a minimum of 5.0 Mbps x 1.0 Mbps.

In 2014, Industry Canada surveyed all internet service providers in Canada asking them to identify areas where they provide at least 5.0/1.0.

With that information in hand, Industry Canada called for proposals to install or upgrade service to that level in the unserved or under-served areas. Seaside applied for and received assistance to participate in that program (called "Connecting Canadians") for most but not all of our coverage area, including the areas you mentioned in your email.

This year, Seaside began a three-year, \$15 million proj-

ect to install new radios capable of speeds up to 10 Mbps x 2 Mbps on most of our towers. We received a \$6 million grant under the Connecting Canadians project, and a \$2 million, interest-free, repayable loan from ACOA. Seaside will provide the remainder of the money (about \$7 million).

Our current basic service provides speeds up to 1.5 Mbps down and 0.5 Mbps for \$49.95 per month. There is a one-time installation charge of \$99, but we waive it for customers who sign a three-year contract.

Once the project is complete, that basic service will still be available for customers who mainly use email, Facebook, and net-surfing. As illustrated on our website, we are adding two new service tiers.

Sandy Graham


Candidate for District 13 (Parrsboro)

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For more information, phone: 902-210-0030
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Liberal

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