

Cree Telecom Sets Modest Goals

Modern Telecommunications for Cree Communities

WELCOME TO EYYOU ISTCHEE - SOON TO BE A CONNECTED LAND OF NINE CREE NATIONS WHERE HIGH FIBRE OPTIC SERVICE WILL REACH every student, every home, every school, every clinic, every community service, every commercial outlet and every council office.

It may seem a distant dream for some, but not to the Cree Telecom Committee. According to the project organizers, it could be reality in the near future.

It began as a meeting of minds, technology with a social dimension. Four entities with a common vision agreed to make it happen. The Cree Board of Health and Social Services, Cree School Board, Grand Council of the Crees and James Bay Cree Communications Society formed a committee to develop a modern telecommunications facility.

The telecom project, headed by Alfred Loon of the CRA Economic Development office, Buckley Petawabano, the Grand Council delegated rep-



resentative and Raymond Menarick, president of James Bay Cree Communications Society, oversaw a business and an engineering plan that integrates the existing Hydro-Québec fibre-optic capacity into a network that joins all nine Cree communities.

Community Network

Together, they developed a plan to create a network that will provide the same quality of services available in large urban centres. — for telehealth and social services, for distance

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and regional learning, for high-speed Internet service to the public, to institutions and to business.

As Grand Chief Ted Moses told a group of high-tech executives earlier this summer, "we are a community confident that we have a role in the future of our land. But to exist successfully alongside cities in North America, we need the technology and the support of technology professionals."

"Our project is more than the delivery of telecommunications services. It is also about employment, about creating technical and management jobs. It will also be a centre of excellence, teaching and training young Crees in technology skills."

Telecommunications is both a regional and local issue, said Alfred Loon. "We need regional operating centres to employ people across the area and to serve the Cree institutions." The project intends to build two control stations, one in Chisasibi and one in Mistissini.

Local and Regional Services

"The Chisasibi centre will be a full 24/7 management facility and a mobile repair unit. A second centre in Mistissini will provide operational backup, a training facility and maintenance

for emergency and crisis operations."

In addition, every community will be served by its own fibre-optic ring to three points of service: the school, clinic and the local Internet provider connecting businesses, councils and residents.

According to Raymond Menarick, during the construction phase, training will be conducted as a CEGEP program. These courses will cover fibre-optic theory and maintenance, Internet technology, computer sciences, programming, software development, installation and troubleshooting; students will graduate with a diploma in technical sciences.

The project will need young and talented people, interested in electronics and new technology, from all communities, he noted.

Job Creation Initiative

"We are aiming high," added Buckley Petawabano. "Our goal is to create 25 jobs, about eight regional positions in troubleshooting, service and repairs, and jobs in every community to provide Internet support and fibre technology."

Fibre-optic communication is digital technology. Unlike the

current microwave relay system in use in the communities, this project will have the capacity to expand for the future, making videoconferencing for health and education available in all schools, clinics and offices and delivering radio and television services.

The network will also require substantial Québec and federal government support. Programs for rural and isolated communities, noted Alfred Loon, are not well funded but we are hopeful that governments will understand our lack of existing infrastructure and our overwhelming need for health, education and social services.

Capital expenses, at \$22.7 million, cover 2,046 km of secure, double active network fibre, a digital microwave backup and a local copper cable network to connect every home in every community. It includes approximately \$5.3 million for construction and infrastructure contracts for Cree businesses, \$1 million for startup expense and for full-time permanent jobs in management, maintenance and support services.

Non-Profit Facility

To run the network, the Telecom Committee set up Eeyou Communications Network, an independent corporation. A community-oriented

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enterprise, this non-profit company is composed of telecommunications professionals, specialists designated by member organizations and qualified representatives of community interests. It intends to generate an annual operating surplus and is based on an expected multi-year agreement with Hydro-Québec to use a part of its fibre optic facilities.

“Over the years,” said Grand Chief Moses, “we have faced opponents over long-standing grievances - Hydro-Québec over its power dams and other past grievances, Télébec over its rate increases and poor quality of services, the Québec government over rights.

“We battled them across the table, in the courtroom, but these past confrontations are no longer before us. Today we have adopted a new way of thinking about our old foes and about our old problems.”

As Dr. Moses told the Québec government at the signing of the Paix des Braves accord, “I believe that our communities will grow and prosper. The regional economy will not be burdened by the stagnation of massive unemployment.

“There will be new sources of investment in the economy of the North, and this will spill over into every part of the economy.” ■

*Télébec Fails to Convince CRTC***Toll-Free Inter-Community Calling Put on Hold**

WITH A FIBRE OPTIC NETWORK, ALL COMMUNITIES could connect without long-distance charges. So why can't the regular telephone system do it too?

The Telecom Committee encouraged Télébec to provide this service on its telephone network. So when the telephone company, a part of the Bell Canada group of companies, asked the CRTC for permission, the Grand Council endorsed the concept of inter-community dialing.

The CRTC ruled that it “recognizes the merits of creating an expanded LCA (local calling area) to group communities of interest, such as the Cree communities, and to thus facilitate local economic development. The proposed expanded LCA, as the GCC (Grand Council of the Crees) argues, would also facilitate communication and access to community services. The Commission supports the proposal to create an expanded LCA for the Cree communities of James Bay.”

Télébec Rejected

But, despite Grand Council support, it called the Télébec demand for substantial funding “inappropriate” — and the entire toll-free inter-community dialing application for Cree communities was turned down. In its re-

quest, Télébec stated it required \$4.3 million for new equipment. It asked for a \$9.05 per month rate increase for Cree customers as well as a \$1.6 million grant for operating costs from a fund earmarked to insure basic telephone services for remote communities.

“The Commission does not agree with Télébec's proposal of using the National Contribution Fund to recover operating costs for this project,” the CRTC said. Telebec intended to use the new funds “to increase the carrying capability of its distribution network and modify its switches.”

“The Cree communities waited a long-time for toll-free communication,” cited the CRTC, and “want the same privileges offered elsewhere”

CRTC Asks for Grand Council Approval

The CRTC told Telebec to submit “a more detailed cost analysis to the GCC for approval. The analysis should take into consideration a targeted rate increase for subscribers of the proposed expanded LCA for the Cree communities of James Bay or any alternative source of financial compensation other than the National Contribution Fund. Following GCC approval, Télébec could resubmit its application.” ■

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Eeyou Communications Network

New Telecom Company Sets Long-Term Action Plan

EYYOU COMMUNICATIONS INTENDS TO:

- provide businesses and services with the capability to compete with larger markets
- allow for local and regional services to share vital information
- develop new avenues for cultural expression
- access resource libraries and health services
- participate in learning networks
- integrate new technology into the community environment

The founding partners, the Grand Council of the Crees (Eeyou Istchee), Cree School Board, Cree Board of Health and Social Services and James Bay Cree Communications Society, proposed that Eeyou Communications Network be an "open network" that treats its clients with an equitable and cost effective service.

Its potential market is the Cree and non-Cree Jamesien communities, families, youth and elders. Its services are intended primarily for health, education and economic and cultural development.

The high-speed fibre-optic network will provide communication services for Cree and non-Cree entrepreneurs and individuals in the telecommunications business, for social services and for regional and local government. ■



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