

Cellular Service Improvement Options**Report Purpose**

To provide Council with a report on near-term options to improve broadband and cellular service in Strathcona County, including funding opportunities, current and future state infrastructure plans, barriers identified by telecom carriers, and advocacy and communications options.

Recommendation

n/a

Our Strategic Goals

Goal 2 - Healthy and Safe Community

Goal 3 Priority - Growth and development that prioritizes community well-being and economic benefits

Report

In response to Council's motion and in consideration of cellular service complaints within urban and rural Strathcona County, administration is providing the following details in conjunction with the presentation on cellular services.

Background

Administration has met with cellular service providers regarding the details of the motion, as well as the invitation to present to Council on the current state of cellular services. We recognize the need for these services for citizens and County operations, and we continually request and pursue service improvements. As an example of this, internal cellular repeaters have been installed in several County facilities to improve service within our facilities for the public and staff.

TELUS

In 2022, to support expanded services we entered into a "small cell agreement" with TELUS that outlines how TELUS will perform installations and work with administration for the rollout of 5G services in the County. This agreement, however, does not mandate TELUS to do any work.

Due to security concerns, the federal government has banned Huawei devices in Canada. These devices were in use by TELUS and were required to be replaced, resulting in losses of hundreds of millions of dollars for TELUS. In early 2023, due to this situation, TELUS advised they will not be expanding their network until after 2026.

Shaw/Rogers

Shaw and Rogers were caught up in a merger for the last two plus years and froze most of their ongoing capital programs. Now that it is completed, Rogers is now starting to engage with municipalities and plan future work. Strathcona County has engaged with Rogers and through their standard business processes are currently considering roadmap activities for future work. We do not have a statement on Strathcona County in these plans at this time.

BELL Mobility

Strathcona County leverages BELL for our corporate services, however the BELL network in western Canada is largely supported by TELUS through sharing agreements and has seen

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similar impacts regarding Huawei devices. We have had some discussions about service improvements with BELL and are waiting to hear of additional opportunities to work towards resolving some of the concerns raised to them.

Areas of responsibility for Cellular Services

- **Federal:** The federal government regulates the telecommunications industry, including cellular services, through the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC). The CRTC sets the rules and standards for wireless carriers, such as spectrum allocation, roaming agreements, wholesale access, consumer protection, and competition.
- **Provincial:** The provincial government also has the authority to set additional regulatory requirements for cellular services to address local concerns, such as licensing the distribution and retail sale in their respective jurisdictions and carrying out associated compliance and enforcement activities. The Government of Alberta currently does not enforce any regulations on this space.
- **Municipal:** Municipal governments also commonly regulate cellular infrastructure such as cell towers and antennas within its boundaries. These regulations include the location, design, height, and appearance of cellular structures to ensure they comply with local bylaws and zoning regulations. Strathcona County currently has a land use bylaw that regulates towers based on these conditions.
- **Cellular providers:** Providers are responsible for aligning to the regulations set out by the three levels of government and are entirely responsible for the delivery, maintenance, costs, and service quality of their networks. In complying with these regulations, providers are licensed and authorized to deliver services in Canada, and consumers and businesses purchase services directly from the providers.

Spectrum and Advocacy

Administration is providing an advocacy strategy with assistance from Intergovernmental Affairs and Corporate Communications on key messages for different levels of government and when Council engages with them. We are also providing key messages for conversations that Council has with the public and local businesses.

Funding and Grants

The Alberta Broadband Fund and Universal Broadband Fund will continue with intakes within the next six months, and we anticipate the ability to apply for grants during these intake windows. We are hopeful that the future intake periods will have modified qualification criteria so that the County can participate in these programs, however, to date we have not seen modifications to these criteria.

Future Cellular Opportunities

Strathcona County can anticipate some network growth with cellular services, however, this will be focused largely on new developments such as Cambrian Crossing and the new Bremner development happening in the future. Although these new cellular deployments are intended to provide service to the residents of these new areas, other areas of Strathcona County may see residual benefits from this work in improved cellular coverage.

Council and Committee History

October 16, 2023 Postponement passed by the Mayor's Executive Committee.
July 18, 2023 Council approved: THAT Administration invite the primary internet and cellular service providers operating in Strathcona County to meet with Council or Priorities Committee, as soon as possible, to discuss solutions for the poor broadband and cellular service throughout the County, including both urban and rural areas; and

THAT Administration prepare a report for Council's consideration by the end of October 2023 on near term options to improve broadband and cellular service throughout Strathcona County including funding opportunities, current state and future state infrastructure plans, identification of barriers that telecom carriers have identified and options for an advocacy and communications strategy.

Other Impacts

Policy: n/a

Legislative/Legal: n/a

Financial/Budget: n/a

Interdepartmental: n/a

Master Plan/Framework: n/a

Communication Plan

Key messages will be provided to Council for their use in discussions with residents and for advocacy purposes. At this time, no media release or media events are recommended however Communications will continue to work with Information Technology Services and Intergovernmental Affairs as advocacy moves forward.

Enclosure

1 Cellular Service Improvement Options presentation