



STAFF REPORT TO COMMITTEE

DATE OF REPORT February 27, 2023
MEETING TYPE & DATE Committee of the Whole of March 22, 2023
FROM: Economic Development Division
Strategic Services Department
SUBJECT: Cowichan Regional Internet & Cellular Connectivity Strategy
FILE: 6430-20 REG Connectivity Strat 2022-2023

PURPOSE/INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the Cowichan Regional Internet & Cellular Connectivity Strategy. It will be accompanied by a presentation from consultants from IBI Group.

RECOMMENDED RESOLUTION

That it be recommended to the Board that the Cowichan Regional Internet & Cellular Connectivity Strategy recommendations be endorsed and advanced as staff resources and priorities allow.

BACKGROUND

In 2020, the CVRD Board Strategic Plan identified the development of a connectivity strategy as a key action towards creating healthy, livable, and efficiently-served communities for residents of all backgrounds and income levels.

After conducting extensive background research and securing funding for the project in 2021, Economic Development Division launched the Cowichan Regional Internet & Cellular Connectivity Strategy project in early 2022. Working in collaboration with consultants from IBI Group, Economic Development Division staff undertook a process of research, analysis, education and engagement that has resulted in the development of a Regional Connectivity Strategy and four (4) Community Connectivity Plans. These reports are included in Attachments A to F.

Cowichan Regional Internet & Cellular Connectivity Strategy

The Cowichan Regional Internet & Cellular Connectivity Strategy provides a regional approach to advancing connectivity services in Cowichan. It establishes a vision for the future of connectivity for the region, outlines the current state of connectivity infrastructure and services, and identifies strategies for addressing gaps. The report provides a detailed analysis of broadband internet connectivity, with a high-level analysis of cellular services in the region.

Technical analysis found the Cowichan region to be relatively well-served for high-speed internet, with 96% of Cowichan premises having access to the federal speed target of 50 Megabits per second download and 10 Megabits per second upload. However, the ISED data was challenged in some areas by the results of internet speed tests completed by community members. Similarly, published coverage maps from cellular service providers show good coverage throughout the populated areas of Cowichan, while public consultation identified coverage as an issue in many areas.

Regional community engagement found that while most respondents were satisfied with the speed and reliability of their broadband internet services, many felt that the cost does not match the value of services provided. Also, a higher proportion of respondents were dissatisfied with their cellular coverage than with their internet services.

Affordability of services was a key message heard from all corners of the region, but in particular from lower-income areas. If the infrastructure is in place, but residents cannot afford the services, then, the report concludes, those residents should still be considered underserved.

As a result of the engagement findings, the following vision for the future of connectivity for the Cowichan Valley Regional District was developed and approved by the Board in June 2022:

“The Cowichan Valley Regional District is a connected community, with an appropriate and efficient mix of technologies deployed throughout the region that provides affordable access to connectivity services for all homes and businesses. Connectivity enhances the livability of our communities by enabling business, employment, health care, education, security, and social and family connections for residents of all backgrounds and income levels.”

The Cowichan Regional Internet & Cellular Connectivity Strategy recommends that the CVRD continue in its role of observing, advocating and influencing the rollout of connectivity infrastructure and services in the region, with the potential to evolve into a more active role in the future. The report provides 28 specific recommended actions to be undertaken to achieve the region’s connectivity vision. The recommendations focus on advocacy and facilitation, affordability and access, infrastructure, local government policy, and cellular coverage.

Community Connectivity Plans

The Community Connectivity Plans outline specific technologies, network plans and funding models to bring improved service to the four (4) priority underserved communities: Thetis and Penelakut Islands, Cowichan Station, Ditidaht First Nation, and the Cowichan Lake Region. The Plans were developed through technical analysis and a roadshow of in-person engagement events, one in each of the chosen communities. The intent was to provide specific tactics for the communities to develop projects and seek out funding to improve connectivity services in their areas, with support from CVRD staff.

Thetis Island is served by outdated Telus infrastructure, fixed wireless, and satellite services, and applications for funding to serve the island have been submitted to higher levels of government. Meanwhile, Penelakut Island has had a recent Telus Pure Fibre buildout completed, but residents still report poor connectivity and concerns around affordability of services. Cellular service was identified as a concern for both islands. The recommendations are to:

- support the existing funding applications for fibre service on Thetis Island,
- obtain a third-party assessment of the fibre infrastructure and services on Penelakut Island to identify issues causing poor connectivity,
- investigate options for Penelakut Tribe to provide internet service to its members as a utility in order to address affordability, and
- facilitate discussions with cellular service providers to address coverage gaps on both islands.

Cowichan Station has areas of underserved homes clustered mainly along Mountain Road and Riverside Road, which are served by legacy infrastructure. Attendees at the public engagement session expressed a strong desire for fibre service over wireless, citing health concerns related to wireless services. In order for the community to have long-term control over the types of technologies deployed, a community-owned fibre network covering all of Cowichan Station would need to be built. Since this option entails considerable cost and capacity to implement, the alternative is to engage an existing internet service provider to extend services down Mountain and Riverside Roads, with the understanding that they may deploy wireless services in the future. Further community engagement is recommended to determine which option should be pursued.

Ditidaht First Nation is served by a patchwork of fibre, coax and satellite solutions, with a low-bandwidth microwave backhaul from Youbou. A new Connected Coast fibre landing site is planned for this community. Given its remote location, residents are particularly concerned with safety and access to essential services, and business opportunities are also impacted by the lack of appropriate connectivity. The recommendation is to engage an internet service provider to apply for funding to build a new fibre to the premises network from the Connected Coast landing site.

The Cowichan Lake Region has areas of served and underserved premises. Areas of concern include Youbou, Honeymoon Bay, Caycuse, and the outskirts of the Town of Lake Cowichan. While unconfirmed, evidence suggests that fibre backbone is present in the Town but has not been extended out to any homes or businesses. A multi-phased approach is recommended where a service provider is engaged to extend fibre backbone out from the Town to Youbou and Honeymoon Bay to serve new telecommunications towers in both towns. Once in place, the backbone improves the business case for an internet service provider to extend fibre to the premise services throughout the region.

ANALYSIS

The Cowichan Regional Internet & Cellular Connectivity Strategy provides a thorough analysis of the connectivity landscape in the region, considering not just infrastructure, but also affordability and access to technology. This goes beyond what has been accomplished in other regions that have completed similar strategies, and will allow the Cowichan Region to address the wide range of issues impacting people's ability to connect.

Looking forward to implementation, Economic Development Division staff will look to address the recommended actions beginning with those identified as high priority. In addition, several of the recommendations have identified other CVRD Divisions as the lead for implementation, with support from Economic Development Division staff. With 28 recommendations coming out of this report, organizational capacity is likely to be the most significant limiting factor in progressing these items, and additional staff capacity may be needed. However, Board endorsement of these recommendations will allow staff to advance recommended initiatives as and when resources and priorities allow.

In implementing the Community Connectivity Plans, staff foresee a joint approach led by community champions with support from CVRD staff.

FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Cowichan Regional Internet & Cellular Connectivity Strategy was funded by \$45,000 from Function 121 – Economic Development, which was leveraged to secure \$15,000 from Northern Development Initiative Trust and \$30,000 from Island Coastal Economic Trust, for a total project budget of \$90,000.

There is currently no funding within Function 121 – Economic Development dedicated to implementing the recommendations in this report. Staff will continue to monitor possible grant funding opportunities and bring those forward to the Board for consideration.

COMMUNICATION CONSIDERATIONS

A press release on the strategy is being developed and will be released through the CVRD. The strategy will be available on the EDC website.

STRATEGIC/BUSINESS PLAN CONSIDERATIONS

This project supports Action 6.4 of the CVRD Strategic Plan 2020-2022: to develop a regional connectivity strategy and pursue provincial and federal funding to support the delivery of broadband service to all communities in the CVRD.

GENERAL MANAGER COMMENTS

☐ Not Applicable

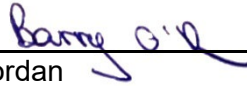
Referred to (upon completion):

- ☒ Community Services (*Arts & Culture, Cowichan Community Centre, Cowichan Lake Recreation, South Cowichan Recreation, Facilities & Transit*)
- ☒ Corporate Services (*Finance, Human Resources, Information Technology, Legislative Services*)
- ☒ Operations (*Parks & Trails, Recycling & Waste Management, Utilities*)
- ☒ Land Use Services (*Building Inspection & Bylaw Enforcement, Community Planning, Development Services, Strategic Initiatives*)
- ☒ Strategic Services (*Communications & Engagement, Economic Development, Emergency Management, Environmental Services*)

Prepared by:

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Not Applicable
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Reviewed for form and content and approved for submission to the Committee:

Resolution:

Financial Considerations:

☒ Corporate Officer

☒ Chief Financial Officer

ATTACHMENTS:

Attachment A – Cowichan Regional Internet & Cellular Connectivity Strategy
Attachment B – Cowichan Regional Infrastructure & Service Availability Report
Attachment C - Community Connectivity Plan – Cowichan Station
Attachment D - Community Connectivity Plan – Thetis & Penelakut Islands
Attachment E - Community Connectivity Plan – Ditidaht First Nation
Attachment F – Community Connectivity Plan – Cowichan Lake Area
Attachment G – Connectivity Strategy Presentation – IBI Group