

Presentation to NDP Roundtable

On

A Case for Continued Funding for Community Access Program

From

David Murdoch
Halifax Regional CAP Association – Coordinator

7.30pm Monday 23 October 2006

Dear Friends,

What Is CAP? (from Industry Canada website at http://pac.ic.gc.ca/pub/about_us/whatiscap.html)

The Community Access Program (CAP) is a Government of Canada initiative, administered by Industry Canada, which aims to provide Canadians with affordable public access to the Internet and the skills they need to use it effectively. With the combined efforts of the federal, provincial and territorial governments, community groups, social agencies, libraries, schools, volunteer groups and the business community, CAP helps Canadians, wherever they live, take advantage of emerging opportunities in the new global knowledge-based economy. Under CAP, locations like schools, libraries and community centres act as public access points to ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies), and provide computer support and training.

The program plays a crucial role in bridging the digital divide;
contributing to the foundation for electronic access to government services;
encouraging on-line learning and literacy;
fostering the development of community based infrastructure; and,
promoting Canadian e-commerce.

CAP In Nova Scotia

Most of our CAP sites, which are located in 279 Nova Scotia communities, are in rural areas of the province and in many communities are the only source of public internet access. Some clients may be low-income or in receipt of income support. Others may face multiple barriers to employment. CAP is a means to access services available on-line, to help with basic skills such as resume writing, and to take distance education courses and technology training. In addition, other agencies and groups use the CAP sites to deliver programs.

Many urban CAP sites target their ICT services to families and individuals who are disadvantaged such as youth at risk, single parent families, those with low incomes and low education, seniors, Persons with Disabilities and Immigrants.

Some Nova Scotians have literacy and disability barriers that preclude them from using ICTs without some assistance from CAP sites that have the capability to offer assistive technologies.

Why Use ICTs?

Today there is a definite movement in Canada for everyone to use on-line government services (at all three levels of government), and we are told that government service centres will be disappearing, as more e-government continues to emerge.

Increasingly, ICT access and use is a requirement of job searching and employment, education and conducting business as well as participating as a citizen in both the local and the wider community.

In Nova Scotia we are desperately looking for ways to attract people to work and live in our beautiful province, in order to stem the flow of our workers heading West. If we truly want to attract a strong new workforce, we need to build on important infrastructure for our rural regions rather than detract from it.

Connectivity is such an integral part of modern life these days, it is vital for forward thinking businesses and smart communities to ensure that their residents can take full advantage of the potential offered.

Many employers now only accept employment applications and resumes via the Internet, and are requiring applicants have greater computer proficiency than ever before.

Recently, the TV Guide publication announced that after November 2006 it will no longer be published on paper but that the only way to access copies will be online.

There is an increasing expectation for all Canadians wherever they live to have access and be able to use ICTs as a part of their participation in society.

And yet if we look at what is proposed in the Telecommunications Policy Review Panel Final Report 2006, it will be left to the market place to determine who will have access and how we should use the Internet.

Government Policy Indicators

In 2005 the Government of Canada established the Telecommunications Policy Review Panel (TPRP) to conduct the first major public review of Canada's telecommunications policy framework since 1993.

The TPRP Final Report has recommended guidelines:

In addition to clarifying the policy objectives, the Telecommunications Act should establish the following new guidelines for government and regulatory action:

Market forces should be relied upon to a maximum extent feasible

Regulatory and other government measures should be adopted only where market forces are unlikely to achieve a telecommunications policy objective within a reasonable time frame

Regulatory and other government measures should be efficient and proportional to their purpose and should only minimally interfere with the operation of market forces to meet the objectives.

Market Forces will fill the gap?

Market forces will ensure that the most impoverished Canadians are able to apply for welfare online?

Market forces will work in partnership to ensure broad band access in rural and remote Canada?

Market forces will mentor and train millions of individuals so that they can use the Internet to find the job that enables them to pay for access at home?

Market forces will work cooperatively to maintain a network of 3,600 CAP sites across Canada and continue to nurture over 20,000 partnerships and motivate the tens of thousands of volunteers and board members to continue this service?

To my knowledge no Canadian commercial Internet Service Provider (ISP) has provided public ICT access as a part of its corporate strategy and so why should we expect under a new Canadian Government to see any efforts made to require

public ICT services to be provided by the market place. Nor should we expect that the market place will deliver high speed internet to remote and rural areas of Canada unless there is a profit potential.

Direct government intervention is needed to ensure not only that all communities in Canada have access to broadband services, but also that Canadians have the means and the knowledge to make effective use of those services.

The Community Access Program is an important element of that infrastructure.

Barb Allen at the CAP site in Terence Bay had something important to say to Industry Canada Minister Bernier in a recent letter...

Today there is a definite movement in Canada to get everyone using on-line government services, and we are told that service centres will be disappearing as e-government continues to emerge.

In fact Canada's e-government is leading the world, so it seems ironic that while promoting e-service, you cut public computer access off at the knees.

We notice that more and more Government employees have blackberries to keep them connected, while at the same time the Federal Government plans to close Community Access Sites.

What kind of message is the government sending?

Maybe Government employees could use CAP Sites instead of their own personal devices, which obviously keep them firmly separated from the majority of Canadians, which is why you have come up with this ridiculous plan to save a few dollars on the backs of the poor and disadvantaged, by closing Community Access Sites.

Closing Words

It is apparent that CAP must continue to be supported financially by the federal government. Many of the other contributors offer in-kind support of human and other resources. The federal cash pays for such things as the internet connection; insurance; sometimes it pays the rent as it does in Moser River. This small amount of cash is vital in supporting all the other parts of provision of public access to ICTs for those that will otherwise be left behind.

Using the small amount of Federal CAP funding, the CAP Community in Nova Scotia has worked hard to develop countless partnerships with untold numbers of agencies, organizations and individuals, all of whom work collaboratively to bridge the ever changing digital divide. Our Federal government needs to show good faith and support for the citizens who have worked so hard to make a positive difference in changing the way Canadians communicate in the 21st century.

The CAP program is renowned globally for its ability to rally community support and make positive difference at the grassroots community level, this work needs to be enhanced, not diminished.

David Murdoch <coordinator@hrca.ns.ca>
Halifax Regional CAP Association Coordinator www.hrca.ns.ca
6162 Duncan Street, Halifax, Nova Scotia CANADA B3L 1K2
(902) 422-2110 voice (902) 425-2747 fax (902) 476-6648 cell

Last updated Mon Oct 23 17:56:25 ADT 2006