



Community Government of Whatì

P.O. Box 71, Whatì, NT X0E 1P0
(867) 573-3401 Phone
(867) 573-3018 FAX

February 16, 2021

Mason Mantla
Acting Chair
Wek'èezhìi Land & Water Board

Support Letter for the Tlìchò Fibre Optic Cable to Whatì Project

Dear Mason:

I am writing on behalf of Tlìchò Community Government of Whatì to provide a letter of support for a proposed Tlìchò Fibre Optic Cable project to service the Tlìchò Community of Whatì and to ensure the Board understands how important this project is to the Community of Whatì.

Right now, the Community of Whatì is serviced at 15/2 Mbps, far below the 50/10 Mbps targeted by the federal government in *High-Speed Access for All: Canada's Connectivity Strategy*. This existing technology results in limited and unreliable access for Tlìchò Citizens, Businesses, and government institutions in Whatì.

Internet Needs of the Tlìchò Community of Whatì

Whatì is a community of approximately 500 people, most of whom are Tlìchò Citizens. It is home to a number of Tlìchò Businesses, and to the Tlìchò Community Government of Whatì. There are many young Tlìchò Citizens in the Community of Whatì and who study from Kindergarten to Grade 12 at the Mezi Community School. Each year, Tlìchò Government provides funding through Our Nation's Education (ONE) Student Financial Program to support Tlìchò learners in pursuing post-secondary programs. Whatì also operates a wellness centre for Tlìchò Citizens.

Students need reliable Internet — a fact highlighted during the Covid-19 pandemic. With the vast amount of post-secondary options and career training available via distance learning, reliable internet service will provide youth in Whatì with the choice to stay in their own community to study and maintain their traditional ties.

Residents and local health practitioners will both benefit from improved access to essential medical and mental health/telehealth services via high-speed reliable internet service. Residents can receive the care they need, and health professionals can connect with larger centres to help alleviate pressure on local providers.

Reliable internet service reduces the need for travel between communities for meetings, thereby reducing travel costs and greenhouse gas emissions, increasing safety, and improving communication and governance ties between Chiefs, Councils, and community governments.

Increased employment and business options are unlocked with reliable internet service. Whatì residents can expand their career and income earning potential with work from home options and e-commerce — potentially bringing local business to global markets. Local businesses and tourism operators in Whatì and along the Tłıchq all-season road can also get and stay connected online through robust, interactive and informative websites and take advantage of online business tools. More families may choose to order groceries and other supplies online, rather than making the trip to Yellowknife or Edmonton. Whatì businesses have an opportunity to benefit from this shipping demand. Similarly, Whatì residents could take advantage of online courses, webinars, conferences and more — leading to improved service delivery, increased skill development, and higher job satisfaction.

Other benefits of reliable internet service include improving community ties with those students and family members who have travelled away from Whatì and potentially increasing phone connectivity which in turn greatly increases public safety, security, and connectivity.

All of these activities — from the private to public to educational sectors — require reliable and adequate access to internet. This need is even greater given increasing reliance on the internet in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the growing shift to digital modes of communication in all sectors of the economy.

The Proposed Tłıchq Fibre Optic Cable Project

Tłıchq Government is seeking to meet a core need of Tłıchq Citizens in Whatì by supplying and installing a high-speed fibre optic cable along the Tłıchq All Season Road (“TASR”), as well as last-mile infrastructure in the Community of Whatì.

The TASR is a world class Public Private Partnership to bring a reliable, year-round transportation route to the Community of Whatì. With the new TASR, the Community of Whatì will see additional tourism and traffic that will further tax their already overburdened internet system.

During the early work on the TASR project, discussions occurred regarding the possibility of installing fibre optic cable to Whatì as part of the construction project. Tłıchq Government’s equity and construction partner indicated that efficiencies could be realized if a fibre optic line is installed while the TASR is being constructed.

Whatì is the only NWT community that was not included in an application by Northwestel to the CRTC's Broadband Fund to improve connectivity for NWT communities. Whatì was not included because unlike other communities where other technologies can be used, Whatì requires fibre optic cable, and at the time there was no business case for installing this infrastructure.

TASR was competitively procured and awarded to the North Star Infrastructure team, having the highest score following financial and technical evaluation. Peter Kiewit Sons ULC, the TASR design-builder, is currently engaged to develop design and cost estimate, as well as advance permitting for the Project. Tłıchų Government will own the backbone and will contract out the installation of the cable to a partnership between Peter Kiewit Sons ULC and Tłıchų Investment Corporation, ensuring that significant knowledge transfer and capacity building occurs within the Tłıchų community. Northwestel will own the last mile (a separate project to be applied for under the core Universal Broadband Fund by Northwestel) and will operate and maintain both the backbone and last mile.

While there are some design and costing details yet to be worked through, the Community Government have a high degree of confidence that building the main line infrastructure as described in this letter would be feasible, cost effective, and hugely impactful for Tłıchų Citizens, but the window to realize this opportunity is quickly narrowing.

Having the fibre transport in place will also allow last mile to be deployed by Northwestel in Whatì quickly, potentially in 2021. With last mile in place, in addition to higher capacity afforded by the fibre backbone, the Community of Whatì will also get:

- Higher speeds, expecting to far exceed the current Federal Government mandate of 50/10 Mbps;
- Better affordability, as Northwestel's goal is to provide Whatì with the same packages and prices as Yellowknife;
- New household connections, which are inaccessible by the current technology.

However, clearly, these benefits will not be possible without installing the fibre cable along TASR first.

Building the Tłıchų Fibre Optic Cable Project now, while construction of the TASR continues, is expected to reduce costs by:

- Creating efficiencies from synergies with existing TASR construction resources;
- Eliminating rework associated with ground disturbance; and
- Eliminating impacts to the traveling public.

The Tłıchų Fibre Optic Cable Project would follow the TASR route, meaning there would be very little additional disturbance to vegetation and fauna beyond impacts already assessed and approved for the TASR.

Supporting the Tłıchǵ Fibre Optic Cable Project also has the added benefit of stimulating the northern economy through more jobs, more contracts, and more development opportunities in Tłıchǵ lands. Tłıchǵ Businesses are standing by with skilled workers, experts, and equipment ready to mobilize to bring this project to life.

Given that construction for the TASR is ongoing, investing in the Tłıchǵ Fibre Optic Cable Project now has the potential to dramatically improve the quality of life for Tłıchǵ Citizens at a marginal cost to Canada.

The Cost to Develop the Tłıchǵ Fibre Optic Cable Project

Preliminary cost estimates to supply and install ~115 km of fibre optic cable along the TASR route would be approximately \$10 million. This cost estimate is predicated on the assumption that the Tłıchǵ Fibre Optic Cable Project is built concurrently to the TASR. Not building the fibre project concurrently to the TASR project would incur an additional 20% to 30% in costs associated with lost synergies. This cost does not include the costs of distribution (a separate Northwestel project as discussed above) or operations and maintenance.

Northwestel has indicated that the cost of the distribution system, commonly referred to as the “last mile”, to connect the homes of Whatı residents to the fibre optic system is expected to be an additional \$2.2 million.

For a project of this magnitude and with such extraordinary potential to improve the lives of Whatı residents, we believe that the Tłıchǵ Fibre Optic Cable Project represents incredible value for money.

Conclusions

As Tłıchǵ Citizens begin to rebuild from the impacts of COVID-19, this project could provide us all with a once in a generation opportunity to shape the Tłıchǵ economy and bring prosperity to the people of Whatı now and far into the future. I appreciate your support for this project.

In Tłıchǵ Unity,



Chief Alfonz Nitsiza

Brett Wheler

From: Sean Craig <Sean_Craig@gov.nt.ca>
Sent: March 1, 2021 10:54 AM
To: Brett Wheler; Michael Conway
Cc: Jamie Koe; Robert.Cornell; Zabey Nevitt; Binay Yadav; Jamie Koe; Lorraine Seale; Melissa Pink
Subject: Whatì Fibre - Environmental Permitting

Good morning Brett.

The GNWT has been approached by the Tłıchq Government (TG) regarding their interest to install a fibre optic telecommunication line within the Tłıchq All Season Road Right-of-Way, from NWT HWY 3, to a point within the community of Whatì. The GNWT is supportive of the TG proposed project and discussions between the TG and the proper GNWT departments are on-going with respect to finalizing a Utility Agreement with Department of Infrastructure and Financial Security requirements with Department of Lands. These positive discussions continue to progress to ensure project success and receive positive approvals, for the Board to make a timely decision within the permitting process.

Should additional information be required please do not hesitate to reach out.

Have a great week.
Sean