

Candidates pledge to work on local internet, broadband

By Rob Paul, Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

With the federal election less than a week away, Canadians are preparing to vote on September 20 as MP candidates in Dufferin-Caledon make a final push in their campaigning efforts.

The Citizen spoke with Dufferin-Caledon MP candidates Kyle Seeback (Conservative), Lisa Post (Liberal), and Jenni Le Forestier (Green) about the ongoing issue of internet accessibility in the area that has been highlighted throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the incumbent, Seeback has championed the push for more affordable and reliable internet, especially for those in rural settings. He says under the Conservative platform, the key to making changes is bringing in more competition for telecommunication companies Bell and Rogers.

"There's two things that we deal with on this," he said. "I can say that I've heard firsthand from so many people in Dufferin-Caledon about both affordability and speed, and we have to fix both. It's not just [a matter of] let's get broadband to everyone and still allow the large telecom companies to charge what I've sometimes heard is up to \$400 or \$500 a month—that's not affordable. So, our plan is twofold; number one, we're going to get every Canadian connected to high-speed Internet by 2025. Number two, we have to find ways to get the prices down and we think the way to do that is through competition. We are going to create a technology task force within the competition bureau to look into anti-competitive behaviour with the big tech companies.

"Foreign competition is going to drive down prices—you look at the United States or the E.U. and they have so many companies offering both wireless and broadband services which cause the prices to go down. Something else we're going to do is look at whether or not the big telecoms are engaging in uncompetitive practices, with respect to the smaller regional service providers. I've actually heard from regional service providers about uncompetitive behaviour from the big two. We've got to do all of these things, there's a lot to do, but we have to do it all. We need to encourage regional players and level the playing field for them, get people connected, and bring in competition to bring down prices."

Having spent the last three years on the Orangeville Council, Post is well versed in the concerns over internet in Dufferin-Caledon, and through investments from the federal government and working with municipalities, she hopes to see the problem resolved.

"It's not a new issue. As a Town Councillor in Orangeville, I've heard about internet issues in our area and surrounding areas in Dufferin County for years," she said. "What the pandemic brought out is the fact that internet isn't a luxury, it's a necessity and it needs to be treated as such. It's as important now as hydro and water is in your house. It's a utility that people need in order to survive and that's all over, that's not just urban centres. Our farmers and agriculture sector rely on access to rural broadband to be able to be profitable and to be able to link most of their technology.

"It's no longer an urban requirement and there's definitely something that needs to be done for the rural areas. We're very fortunate in the Dufferin County part because we've had very loud advocates over the years. The Swift program is one that is partially funded by the province and partially funded by the federal government and with the work of the municipalities and regional government, it's been able to open up some doors. It was slow moving, but now that it's moving, there's a \$10 million investment that's gone into Dufferin County with five approved projects moving forward. That's amazing, but there's more money that needs to go into it and we're not done."

Another approach the Liberals plan to take, says Post, is to make certain that when a company pursues the chance to provide rural broadband to areas in need, that they actually follow through.

"The issue of rural broadband is more than just making sure people have access to wireless internet, it's not that at all, because of the diverse properties that exist in rural Dufferin County and Caledon, having access to just wireless isn't giving access to reliable

internet," she said. "We really need fibre getting to these homes and one of the approaches the Liberal platform is taking is there are places where there have been providers who have purchased up space saying they're going to build broadband. What the Liberal government plans to do if re-elected is require those companies that have purchased the rights to build the broadband connection to actually do it. They'll be given a very aggressive timeline to ensure they accelerate their rollout, and if they don't, they'll lose the opportunity, and it will go back into the market for other providers to bid on."

Having spoken to residents while on the campaign trail, it has only reinforced how big an issue this is in Le Forestier's mind.

Rather than continue with the options pushed by current leaders, she wants to see other routes like Starlink be highlighted.

"I can speak for a lot of my neighbours who have spoken about this with broadband that is not happening if you're anywhere on a rural road, but we're still being taxed for Swift" which has never arrived," she said. "During the pandemic, if you have more than two people working online, I've heard of people getting bills for \$1,400 a month because two people are working from home" that's just not sustainable.

"I think with broadband we've been waiting a long time for it, but unfortunately, Starlink is already happening, and a lot of people are switching to Starlink because for the onetime fee of about \$700 plus paying \$100 month or so it's a lot more affordable. Let's get our elected officials on board with that and it's time to not be so outdated and get with the program because it's already being offered to residents and they're grabbing it."

As a resident in Caledon, Le Forestier has dealt with the internet issues herself and believes enough is enough and that it's just not feasible for residents to work this way.

"I know for me with some of the things I've been advocating for joining Webex or trying to delegate through Zoom can be really challenging," she said. "Even if the wind is blowing a certain way, suddenly your connection isn't great. For people working and kids at home for school, it's a lot to deal with. We definitely need a plan and I'm not sure that broadband is going to help."