

COVID-19 Internet Grant Program officially launched

By Rob Paul

On Monday, May 17, the Town of Caledon officially launched its COVID-19 Internet Grant Program.

At a Council meeting last month, Caledon Council directed staff to develop an internet grant program for the Council to consider and presented the program on May 4.

The program is a one-time, temporary solution to help support residents in under-serviced areas of Caledon. The connectivity issue in the Town has been a pressing issue that has further been brought to light during the pandemic due to an increased reliance on internet services for students who are remote learning and those working from home.

Although the internet grant program is a temporary solution, the Town says it remains focused on finding long-term solutions to Caledon's internet access gap.

The grant program will reimburse residents in under-serviced areas for the purchase of hardware, such as a hotspot device, from any vendor, to improve their service.

Residents with the lowest service or under the 25 megabytes per second (mpbs) download speed and five mbps upload speed are eligible for the program.

"This program will help address the issue of high-speed internet access and cost," said Mayor Allan Thompson. "The grant is meant to assist residents in gap areas while we continue to move forward with our town wide internet strategy. It's a small thing we can do to help take the pressure off during these challenging times."

The idea began in December when the Council asked staff to explore a net-neutral hotspot program for under serviced residents.

Staff issued an expression of interest, and only one submission from Rogers Communications met the criteria for a hot spot program.

This solution put a large administrative responsibility and liability on the Town to secure a lower rate for residents. Staff continued to negotiate with Rogers as per Council's direction, however on April 27, Council passed a motion that directed staff to develop an Internet Grant Program and bring it back for consideration.

When looking into a potential grant program, options investigated included a percentage grant on a household's internet bill or providing eligible residents a Rogers hotspot device and allowing them to sign up directly with Rogers.

These options did not remove the administrative requirements from the Town or address all areas of Caledon with limited coverage.

As a result, staff proposed a one-time Internet Grant Program for residents to support them in accessing alternative service options, such as hotspots, satellite dishes or similar technology to increase their service levels until high-speed access is available in their location, which Council then approved.

The program provides eligible residents with a \$200 grant from the Town on any new device purchased to increase their internet access. This amount was determined based on the cost for a typical hotspot from a major provider.

The reason it's a grant program rather than a tax rebate program is because the Municipal Act, 2001 and Assessment Act do not allow municipalities to provide tax rebates on non-municipal services such as broadband.

The grant program will ensure the Town is in alignment with the Municipal Act, 2001, section 107(1), which provides municipalities the ability to provide grants for valid municipal purposes.

The grants' purpose is to incentivize and assist Caledon households to investigate better internet options that allow better productivity and connectivity for these households during the pandemic and into the future which would further assist the economic, social, health and safety and wellbeing of persons in Caledon.

With the adoption of the program by Council, Service Caledon will administer it with support from Corporate Strategy and Innovation.

Residents will be required to complete an online form to determine eligibility and provide supporting documentation?staff will then review the submitted information and eligibly and will then facilitate the rebate by E-transfer or cheque.

Financially, it is expected to cost the town \$200,000 based on an estimate of 1,000 households meeting the criteria for the program.

To help in understanding the difference between level of services, the following is a general expectation from the three categories of download speed: speeds between one to 25 mbps, allow a user to access email and complete a basic internet search; speeds between 25 to 50 mbps, allow a user to utilize email and search the internet, and stream some lower quality video formats and complete basic video calls with others; speeds of 50 mbps or more, allow a user to email, search the internet, stream high definition videos, complete all video calls and online gaming.

For more information regarding the Town's Internet Grant Program and to check for eligibility through the Town's internet speed test, visit caledon.ca/en/town-services/internet-levy.aspx.