



January 26 2021

EX20.8 - Affordable Internet Connectivity for All - ConnectTO

Dear members of the Executive Committee:

Wireless Toronto is a nonprofit community wireless network founded in 2005, and was at one time the largest network of free-to-use wifi hotspots in the city, including Yonge-Dundas Square, St Lawrence Market, Harbourfront Centre, Dufferin Grove Park, and dozens of others. Our volunteers helped small business owners and public space managers to light up their spaces with free-to-use wifi at a time when private-sector options for setting up those services was prohibitively expensive. While our network has shrunk as these technologies have become easier and cheaper to set up and maintain, our volunteers continue to follow and advocate for initiatives which improve free-to-use public internet access.

The overall proposed approach for ConnectTO seems good and realistic, given practicalities. However, a few concerns to flag:

- According to the work plan, the big questions about digital equity won't be answered until the business model for connectivity is already established. **The digital equity work is what's most urgent here: it needs to inform the connectivity work, and based on the current plan, it's happening too late.**
- Without **specific, concrete goals**, this model has a likelihood of tending towards revenue-generating activities, and not those which will offer the most benefit to the communities who need it. When the four pillars are in conflict with each other, which one gets priority? Specifically: **which needle(s) will this program move, and how far?**
- The City has an unfortunate habit of setting unreasonable and unnecessary requirements for private sector partners/vendors, which effectively excludes many organizations. Since the goal is addressing digital equity, and since the model relies on outside organizations to deliver services to households, it's critical that **small, social-purpose, local, nonprofit, new, worker-owned and equity-seeking-community-owned organizations** are welcomed as delivery

partners -- which, in practice, means **reserving capacity for them, and taking a service design approach to ensuring that the partnership process is accessible and suitable to them.** Even when prioritizing these organizations may result in lower revenue in the short-term, it can result in significantly improved outcomes for the program and the communities it serves.

- The Ryerson research is good, but **we need much more granular data on connectivity, on an ongoing basis. Without it, it will not be possible to evaluate the success of this program.**
- As the value of city assets are "unlocked" through this program, **what assurances can be made to Torontonians that these city assets won't later be sold off,** as the city's last fiber network was in 2008?

We're generally supportive of ConnectTO, and believe that addressing the issues and questions above will help the program actually achieve the digital equity outcomes we all hope for.