

ConnectTO Program Update

Date: July 2, 2025

To: Executive Committee

From: Chief Technology Officer

Wards: All

SUMMARY

This report provides an update on the ConnectTO program, as directed by Executive Committee, including information on the installation and use of public Wi-Fi across the City to bridge the digital divide, and presents a framework for future site selection, as informed by research, data and public consultations.

In 2021, the City of Toronto established the ConnectTO program, prioritizing its work to bridge the digital divide, as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and to address the need for residents to equitably access digital government services. The digital divide, which remains a persistent reality in Toronto, is defined as the gap between those who have internet access, along with the skills, and support to effectively engage online, and those who do not. Approximately 2% of Torontonians, or 58,000 people, currently lack affordable in-home internet access.

ConnectTO has successfully focused on expanding internet connectivity, growing the number of locations of public Wi-Fi from 100 sites exclusively in Toronto Public Library branches to a total of 252 locations across the City in various types of City facilities, with a focus on establishing sites in the City's Neighbourhood Improvement Areas and Emerging Neighbourhoods as identified by the Toronto Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy 2020. By the end of 2025, the City will have approximately 300 public Wi-Fi locations. The program has successfully achieved coverage of public Wi-Fi in 88% of Neighbourhood Improvement Areas and Emerging Neighbourhoods, with each ward in the City hosting at least one public Wi-Fi location. Public Wi-Fi supports a range of users - in 2024, ConnectTO locations received an average of 7,600 daily connections, with 69% of those were repeat connections (users connecting more than once at a given location). The average duration of a connection is 4 hours, which includes all types of devices that can connect to Wi-Fi. Nearly half (45%) of all visits are under 2 hours; 16% are between 5-30 minutes, and over 19% of visits are over 8 hours.

Staff are committed to using a data-driven approach to inform ConnectTO investments and actions, and it is critical that the City regularly assesses its progress toward closing the digital divide and to maximize the impact of its investment. The City has partnered

with higher education institutions, including Toronto Metropolitan University and the University of Toronto, commissioning regular research to understand and support the assessment of the City's efforts to bridge the digital divide. Research and public consultations consistently identify affordability as the primary barrier to home internet access, with marginalized communities disproportionately affected by the digital divide. Public spaces offering Wi-Fi serve as critical points of access, connecting residents who would not otherwise have access to the internet.

Research and public consultations also informed the development of a framework with criteria to determine the need for public Wi-Fi in a local area (e.g. presence of equity-deserving groups, distance to existing public Wi-Fi, and potential for usage), as well as baseline requirements for public Wi-Fi installations (i.e., they must be in a City operated building, that is open to the public and has communal space available). The research also indicates that spaces where the public can linger are a better strategic Wi-Fi investment than transitory spaces, as it promotes typical Wi-Fi uses such as checking emails, working, streaming, browsing, and is supported by stable connectivity, and power access for extended device usage.

In 2025 and 2026, the ConnectTO program will focus on maximizing the impact of investments made to-date, by driving public awareness, digital literacy and utilization of public Wi-Fi, in cooperation with Toronto Public Library and Toronto Community Housing, as well as supporting broader awareness of subsidized internet access programs through the Human Services Integration program.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Chief Technology Officer recommends that:

1. Executive Committee receive this report for information.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

There is no financial impact resulting from the adoption of this report.

The Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer has reviewed this report and agrees with the financial impact information.

EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT

The digital divide is the gap between those who have affordable access, skills, and support to effectively engage online, and those who do not. Bridging the digital divide requires an understanding of barriers facing Torontonians, including those with accessibility needs.

Some of these barriers include the cost of high-speed internet services, limited access to digital devices, gaps in digital literacy, issues with digital accessibility, and concerns about online safety. Many of these barriers are interrelated, and they can all impact residents' ability to meaningfully use or benefit from digital services. This report presents an equity-focused approach to bridging the digital divide that considers unique needs related to internet connectivity and digital access.

DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE IMPACT STATEMENT

The City's [Digital Infrastructure Strategic Framework](#) (DISF) outlines a vision where digital infrastructure is used to create and sustain equity, inclusion, accessibility, and human rights in its operations and outcomes. Equity in this context is achieved when individuals and communities have the information technology capacity needed to engage in digital municipal services and connect with community in the digital realm.

In alignment with the DISF principle of Equity and Inclusion, this report highlights measures that are being taken to address the digital divide and advance digital equity, which supports Strategic Priority 1.4: Connectivity and Digital Equity.

DECISION HISTORY

A decision history is attached to this report as Attachment 1.

COMMENTS

Current State of the Digital Divide in Toronto

The digital divide persists as a reality for many Torontonians. Research commissioned by the City of Toronto and carried out by Toronto Metropolitan University (TMU) on digital access and affordability trends in Toronto households indicated while most Toronto residents surveyed in 2023 have home internet access,¹ affordability remains the biggest barrier for those without, leaving approximately 58,000 disconnected at home.² The digital divide disproportionately impacts low-income households, newcomers, seniors, single parents, people experiencing housing instability, and many racialized groups.³ Without access to internet, these communities face significant barriers in connecting to critical services such as government resources, banking, healthcare, education, and employment opportunities.

Research findings also suggest geographic disparities in the digital divide in Toronto. Many of the areas in Toronto with the lowest rates of internet access are designated as

¹ Angus Lockhart and Sam Andrey, "Toronto's Digital Divide," (Toronto: The Dais, 2024), 5.

² Lockhart and Andrey, "Toronto's Digital Divide," 5.

³ Sam Andrey et al., "Mapping Toronto's Digital Divide" (Toronto: The Dais, 2021), 22

either Neighbourhood Improvement Areas or Emerging Neighbourhoods⁴, including areas such as Downtown Yonge East, Moss Park/Regent Park, O'Connor - Parkview, and Malvern East.

TMU's full report on Toronto's Digital Divide is included as Attachment 2.

Progress on Digital Inclusion

Residents are increasingly seeking access to the internet outside homes and other common locations such as workplaces or businesses. From 2020 to 2023, an increasing number of people reported using public spaces including libraries and informal community gathering places for connectivity (not including workplaces or businesses such as coffee shops). Nearly half of all surveyed residents reported using the internet at public locations such as community centres.⁵

Staff from City divisions have also expressed the importance of having public Wi-Fi in City locations to enhance service delivery and improve client experience, specially citing that those they serve may not have mobile data to access online applications to City services or resources.

Research and public consultation indicate the City should take a comprehensive approach to digital inclusion that builds upon access to internet, through digital literacy programming and striving for a service delivery approach that benefits all Torontonians. Public Wi-Fi enables full participation in and benefit from City services regardless of access to home internet, but coverage of public Wi-Fi alone is not sufficient to bridge the digital divide.

ConnectTO: Bridging the Digital Divide

The City launched ConnectTO in 2021, primarily as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, to prioritize its work to bridge the digital divide. It addresses the need for residents to have equitable access to digital government services. The Program has since built on Toronto Public Library's longstanding, successful public Wi-Fi initiative at its 100 branches. Between 2022 and 2025, the City installed Wi-Fi at 152 sites, more than doubling the number of public Wi-Fi locations available in the City. By the end of 2025, the City will have approximately 300 public Wi-Fi locations. Maps demonstrating the before and after of the ConnectTO program are available in Attachment 3.

Public Wi-Fi is provided in City operated locations through partnerships with City divisions, agencies and corporations in facilities such as Community recreation centres, Civic Centres and Public Squares, Community Hubs, select Toronto Community

⁴ Neighbourhood Improvement Areas are geographic areas identified for targeted support and resources to address the unique challenges and needs of local communities. Emerging Neighbourhoods are 8 "transitioning neighbourhoods" which were identified by City Council in [CD27.5 section 8](#) in 2014 that used to be one of the 13 Priority Areas but were not selected as one of the 31 Neighbourhood Improvement Areas.

⁵ Lockhart and Andrey, "Toronto's Digital Divide," 19.

Housing Corporation and Toronto Seniors Housing Corporation buildings. Research projects, commissioned with Toronto-based higher education institutions, have provided the ConnectTO Program data and insights to assess and inform its approach on addressing the digital divide.

Current Profile of Public Wi-Fi in Toronto

As of May 2025, public Wi-Fi provided via the ConnectTO program is available at 152 City-owned and operated locations, in addition to the existing availability at 100 libraries. A breakdown of locations offering public Wi-Fi is provided in Table 1.

- All 25 City of Toronto wards have at least one public Wi-Fi location
- 88% percent of Neighbourhood Improvement Areas and Emerging Neighbourhoods have at least one ConnectTO W-Fi location

Table 1: Breakdown of City Public Wi-Fi Locations

Locations with public Wi-Fi		
ConnectTO locations		
Type of facility	Number	Details
Community recreation centres	126	
Toronto Community Housing Corporation and Toronto Seniors Housing Corporation buildings	14	Common areas of select residential buildings across the city
Outdoor squares	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Albert Campbell Square • David Pecaut Square • Mel Lastman Square • Nathan Phillips Square
Community Hub	1	Keele Community Hub
Civic Centres	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Toronto City Hall • Metro Hall • North York Civic Centre • Scarborough Civic Centre
Other City locations	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jack Layton Ferry Terminal • St. Lawrence Market • St. Lawrence Hall
Total ConnectTO locations	152	

Locations with public Wi-Fi		
Other City locations offering public Wi-Fi		
Public libraries	100	All Neighbourhood and Branch libraries
Shelters	7	Select shelters across the city

*Updated as of May 2025

A map of City public Wi-Fi locations is available at www.toronto.ca/wifi and is updated regularly as new installations are added. Visitors can find nearby public Wi-Fi locations by entering an address in the search bar.

Public Wi-Fi Usage

ConnectTO locations received an average of 7,600 daily connections from Toronto residents and visitors throughout 2024; 69% of those were repeat connections (users connecting more than once at a given location). According to a City-led survey conducted, as part of larger public consultations, in the summer of 2024, 3 out of 4 survey respondents said they used a City location in the past year to access the internet.

The average duration of a connection is 4 hours, which includes all types of devices that can connect to Wi-Fi. Nearly half (45%) of all visits are under 2 hours; 16% are between 5-30 minutes, and over 19% of visits are over 8 hours. The data suggests that users of ConnectTO Wi-Fi are engaged in sustained activities, like work or studying, but that also using ConnectTO Wi-Fi for short term needs or quick tasks like checking email. Longer connection times (8 hours +) suggests that users may rely on ConnectTO Wi-Fi to support a digital workspace.

Public Wi-Fi Installation and Sustainment Costs

The 5-year total cost of ownership of public Wi-Fi, which includes one-time installation costs, as well as recurring sustainment and replacement costs, is on average, \$237,000, which varies by location and size of area covered⁶.

Public Consultations

In 2024, public consultations were held to inform an expanded Public Wi-Fi Strategy, as directed by Council in 2023.⁷ This consultation used a variety of methods, including a survey, information booths, and facilitated sessions, which helped to ensure that the expanded strategy reflects the widest range of perspectives, including those with lived experience of the digital divide. City staff also worked with community organizations to host more than 25 in-person and online sessions to gather feedback on existing public Wi-Fi locations and to learn more about Torontonians' firsthand experiences with the digital divide. More than 10,000 residents, community organizations, and City staff

⁶ The average annualised costs of ConnectTO public Wi-Fi do not include exceptionally large locations such as St. Lawrence Market or Nathan Philips Square

⁷ [Agenda Item History - 2023.EX8.8](#)

engaged and participated in the community consultations, social media campaign, and survey to provide their feedback on the City's Public Wi-Fi Strategy.

Table 2: Key themes and actions from 2024 public consultations

Key Themes	Actions
<p>Coverage:</p> <p>Most respondents agreed that reliable, public Wi-Fi is important. Nine out of ten supported having Wi-Fi in City buildings where the public is welcome. This includes City-owned or City-managed spaces that are shared with non-profit or community-based organizations delivering programs to local neighbourhoods to meet specific community needs.</p>	<p>The City has more than doubled coverage of public Wi-Fi across Toronto, including Parks and Recreation sites, Toronto Community Housing Corporation and Toronto Seniors Housing Corporation Housing sites, and Civic Centres, using a research-backed framework to shape the ConnectTO Program.</p>
<p>Affordability:</p> <p>Many respondents emphasized the need for affordable home internet and mobile data plans.</p>	<p>The City is sharing information on federal government subsidies for in-home internet through the Human Services Integration office.</p>
<p>Community Impact:</p> <p>Respondents viewed the internet as critical for daily tasks and accessing government and health services. Groups like seniors, low-income families, and people with disabilities would benefit the most.</p>	<p>The City will commission further research in 2025-2026 to investigate the digital divide, identify the needs of Torontonians, and better understand the ways in which people connect to the internet and the impact of public Wi-Fi to inform the ConnectTO Program.</p>
<p>Access to Devices and Hotspots:</p> <p>Expanding access to devices and hotspots was a key priority. Respondents called for growing the Toronto Public Library's hotspot lending program to help low-income families and shelter residents.</p>	<p>The City will continue to partner with the Toronto Public Library to support its mandate of digital equity.</p>
<p>Online Safety:</p> <p>Internet safety ranked as a top concern. While public Wi-Fi was seen as vital, many respondents wanted to know more about how the City addresses security risks and the protection of personal information.</p>	<p>The City will carry out a public awareness campaign in Q3 2025 to promote the safe and secure use of public Wi-Fi, and so users know how their privacy and cybersecurity are protected.</p>

Informed by Research: ConnectTO Framework, 2025 and beyond

The ConnectTO program will continue to partner with City Divisions and Agencies and higher education institutions to lead research engagements to inform its work and support targeted investments that close the digital divide.

ConnectTO Site Selection Framework

Based on the first four years of ConnectTO installations and findings from public consultations and research, staff have developed a framework to guide ConnectTO site selection for greatest impact. This framework includes criteria to determine the need for public Wi-Fi in a local area (e.g. presence of equity-deserving groups, distance to existing public Wi-Fi, and potential for usage), as well as baseline requirements for public Wi-Fi installations (i.e., they must be in a City operated building, that is open to the public and has communal space available). The research also indicates that spaces where the public can linger are a better strategic Wi-Fi investment than transitory spaces, as it promotes typical Wi-Fi uses such as checking emails, working, streaming, browsing, and is supported by stable connectivity, and power access for extended device usage.

Future Research on Impact and User Satisfaction

Research planned for 2026 will examine how individuals are using public Wi-Fi to better understand usage, impacts, and potential outcomes of using public Wi-Fi. These insights will help the City improve the Program (e.g., by refining the site selection framework or adjusting service provision) while continuing to uphold City standards such as privacy protection.

Public Awareness Campaign

Digital inclusion activities will be a key focus area going forward, to improve public awareness and support digital adoption. In the third quarter of 2025, the City of Toronto will have a campaign, in partnership with Toronto Public Library, Toronto Community Housing, and Social Development, to promote ConnectTO public Wi-Fi locations and increase resident and visitor awareness. The aim is that Toronto residents and visitors will be informed about the availability, benefits, accessibility, and safety of public Wi-Fi. The campaign will create enthusiasm about the City's public Wi-Fi and encourage residents and visitors to use public Wi-Fi where available.

Linking eligible families with digital subsidies through the Human Services Integration (HSI) office

Digital subsidies (programs offering high-speed, low-cost access to internet) can offer essential support for families, helping to bridge the gap in access to technology and connectivity. However, many families may not be aware of these opportunities. To address this, Technology Services and the Human Services Integration (HSI) Office in Social Development are partnered to promote enrollment in digital equity subsidy

programs and supports available to all eligible Torontonians. This collaborative effort aims to ensure that internet connectivity is within reach for those who need it most.

The HSI office have advanced the following key activities:

- Updated the Human Services website with new links to the Connecting Families Initiative and Connected for Success program.
- Developing a strategy for proactive services recommendations to ensure that eligible families who contact the City for other services are informed about the available subsidies.

Conclusion

ConnectTO will leverage its research-informed framework and continue to work closely with higher education institutions, ensuring the work it does remains evidence-based and focused on maximizing the benefit of the City's investment. The Program will work with divisional and agency partners on promoting the City's public Wi-Fi to increase awareness and providing digital literacy programs to support public digital adoption.

CONTACT

Neena Sethi, Acting Director, Digital Policy and Office of the Chief Technology Officer, Technology Services Division, 416-338-2745, Neena.Sethi@toronto.ca

SIGNATURE

Sonia Brar
Chief Technology Officer

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1 – Decision History
Attachment 2 – Toronto Metropolitan University's Report on Toronto's Digital Divide
Attachment 3 – Map of Public Wi-Fi Locations: Before and After ConnectTO