

## **Non-Competitive Contract to Continue Research with Toronto Metropolitan University for Digital Equity Research**

**Date:** April 27, 2026

**To:** General Government Committee

**From:** Chief Technology Officer and Chief Procurement Officer

**Wards:** All

### **SUMMARY**

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The purpose of this report is to request City Council authority to enter into a non-competitive contract with Toronto Metropolitan University, a Canadian supplier, to continue digital access research in the amount of \$300,000 net of all applicable taxes and charges (\$305,280 net of Harmonized Sales Tax recoveries Recoveries). This report seeks the establishment of a total ceiling authority for up to a 6-year term, with no commitment to spend the full amount.

This research examines the current state of digital access in Toronto and the ongoing barriers contributing to the gap between those who have internet access and the skills, and support to effectively engage online, and those who do not, often referred to as the "digital divide".

Following City Council's adoption of EX20.8 in 2021, which directed the City to examine barriers to affordable high-speed internet access for vulnerable and underserved residents and to enter into agreements with public entities as needed, the City began regularly commissioning digital equity research to better understand Toronto's digital divide. To date, the City has partnered with Toronto Metropolitan University (TMU) to develop a consistent, Toronto-specific evidence base on digital access, affordability, and inclusion. The City has spent \$115,616 in total with TMU for digital access research, resulting in three public reports:

- [Mapping Toronto's Digital Divide](#) (January 2021),
- [Dimensions of Digital Inclusion](#) (May 2021), and
- [Toronto's Digital Divide](#) (May 2024).

Collectively, this research has provided periodic snapshots of digital access barriers over the past five years, informing City decision-making and updates to Council.

The most recent report found that approximately 2 percent of Torontonians, about 58,000 residents, lack affordable in-home internet access, underscoring the need for continued research to better understand residents' access barriers and experiences.

ConnectTO is a program approved by City Council in 2021 to work towards improving the digital connectivity of all Torontonians. As the ConnectTO program advances, the City is seeking to leverage this continued research to more closely assess whether, and how, ConnectTO investments are contributing to measurable progress toward closing the digital divide. Regular Digital Divide research findings over the next 6 years will inform the City's digital equity planning, strengthen service design and connectivity modernization efforts, and support consistent advice on digital access considerations within broader City service planning and delivery.

A non-competitive procurement may be undertaken where both the proposed procurement and supplier can be justified in good faith based on an exception set out in Toronto Municipal Code Chapter 195, Procurement. This procurement will be proceeding under the exception related to Compatibility, where Toronto Metropolitan University and the City have determined in good faith that both the proposed procurement and the selected supplier, along with the terms and conditions of the contract, are beneficial to the City (Toronto Municipal Code, Chapter 195, Procurement, Section 7.1.E).

City Council approval is required in accordance with Municipal Code Chapter 195, Procurement, where the current request exceeds the Chief Procurement Officer's authority of the cumulative five-year (5) commitment for each supplier, under Article 7, Section 195-7.3 (D) of the Procurement By-Law or exceeds the threshold of \$500,000 net of HST allowed under staff authority as per the Toronto Municipal Code, Chapter 71 Financial Control, Section 71-11A.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

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The Chief Technology Officer and the Chief Procurement Officer recommends that:

1. City Council authorize the Chief Technology Officer to negotiate and enter into agreements until December 31, 2031 with Toronto Metropolitan University, for up to \$300,000 net of all taxes and charges (\$305,280 net of Harmonized Sales Tax), subject to terms and conditions acceptable to the Chief Technology Officer and in a form satisfactory to the City Solicitor.

## **FINANCIAL IMPACT**

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The proposed contract award in this report is \$300,000 net of all taxes and applicable charges (\$305,280 net of HST Recoveries).

Funding for the current year is included in the 2026 Operating Budget for Technology Services. Funding for the requested contract term will be included in Technology Services Division 2027-2031 Operating Budget submissions for consideration through future budget processes. Additional funding details follow in Table 1.

**Table 1 – Financial Impact Summary of Recommended Contract (net of Harmonized Sales Tax recoveries)**

| Division                     | Cost Centre | Cost Element | 2026      | 2027 | 2028      | 2029 | 2030      | 2031 | Total            |
|------------------------------|-------------|--------------|-----------|------|-----------|------|-----------|------|------------------|
| Technology Services Division | IT2148      | 5020106      | \$101,760 | —    | \$101,760 | —    | \$101,760 | —    | <b>\$305,280</b> |

The Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer has reviewed this report and agrees with information included in the Financial Impact section.

## DECISION HISTORY

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At its meeting on July 23 and 24, 2025, City Council adopted the ConnectTO Program Update, which acknowledged the role of ongoing research in informing Toronto-specific decision-making on digital equity.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2025.EX25.14>

At its meeting on October 11 and 12, 2023, City Council directed the Chief Technology Officer to continue intergovernmental collaborations and authorized the Chief Technology Officer to negotiate, enter into and execute any agreements with, and receive funds from or pay funds to other public entities and levels of government with which staff may partner in order to promote regional and other collaboration for more efficient use of public assets, that may be necessary to carry out and implement City Council's decision, on terms and conditions satisfactory to the Chief Technology Officer, and in a form satisfactory to the City Solicitor and to include digital access needs, including the adequacy of affordable internet currently in place for residents in low-income housing, such as Toronto Community Housing Corporation, in the research initiatives set out in Attachment 1 to the report (September 19, 2023) from the Deputy City Manager, Corporate Services and the Chief Technology Officer, and to make requests to other levels of government for support based on research outcomes.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2023.EX8.8>

At its meeting on February 2, 3 and 5, 2021, City Council directed the Chief Technology Officer to develop a strategic framework and workplan for Phase 1 of ConnectTO, including work to better understand barriers to affordable high-speed internet access for vulnerable and underserved residents, and to negotiate and execute agreements with other public entities, as necessary, to support this work.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2021.EX20.8>

## COMMENTS

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This report seeks City Council authority to continue digital access research with Toronto Metropolitan University. Since 2021, TMU has produced 3 reports from research has provided the City with a consistent, Toronto-specific evidence base to understand patterns of digital access, affordability, and inclusion, and to identify the residents most affected by persistent barriers to connect and participate online.

This report will enable the City to continue working with TMU over the next six years to:

- Commission research to track changes in digital access and affordability over time,
- Assess whether digital equity programming and interventions, including ConnectTO investments, are contributing to measurable improvements against the Digital Divide, and
- Deepen the City's understanding of how residents use public Wi-Fi and where connectivity gaps persist, helping to refine program design, site selection, and service delivery while upholding City standards related to privacy, security, and value for money.

This report requests spending authority, up to a maximum amount, to allow the City to continue partnering with TMU until over the next six years, as needed. The authority requested reflects the total potential value over the six-year period and does not commit the City to the full amount. Any continued work would be reviewed and renewed as appropriate, and the City retains the right to discontinue the research at its discretion.

### **Update on the Digital Divide**

The most recent findings, reported to City Council in July 2025 ([2025.EX25.14](#)), provided a 2024 snapshot of digital access in Toronto and confirmed that the digital divide continues to disproportionately affect equity-deserving groups, including low-income households, newcomers, seniors, and residents experiencing housing instability. While most households reported having some form of home internet access, affordability remains the primary barrier for those without, leaving approximately 58,000 Torontonians disconnected. The research also highlights an increased reliance on public spaces—such as community centres and libraries—for internet access, reinforcing that public Wi-Fi is essential for residents who would otherwise remain unconnected.

As the ConnectTO program advances, this research is increasingly important in helping the City assess whether, and how, its digital equity investments are contributing to measurable progress toward closing the digital divide. The findings support evidence-based decision-making by the Technology Services Division and broader City staff by providing current data to inform advice to Council, support reporting on digital equity outcomes, and integrate access and inclusion considerations into policy and service planning. The research also strengthens the City's ability to advocate to other orders of government and align municipal efforts with broader public and private sector investments in broadband infrastructure, public Wi-Fi, and digital services.

Research and public consultations consistently identify affordability as the primary barrier to home internet access, with marginalized communities disproportionately impacted. These findings have informed the development of a City framework to guide public Wi-Fi investments, including criteria to identify areas of need (such as the presence of equity-deserving populations, distance from existing public Wi-Fi, and potential demand), as well as baseline requirements for installations in City-operated, publicly accessible buildings with communal space. The research also indicates that spaces where residents can remain for extended periods offer greater value as Wi-Fi investments than transitory locations, as they better support common online activities such as job searching, accessing services, learning, and communication.

Staff are committed to using a data-driven approach to maximize the impact of ConnectTO investments and to regularly assess progress toward closing the digital divide. Continued research on access remains a critical input to this work, ensuring that City actions remain responsive, inclusive, and aligned with both municipal priorities and broader digital access developments across Toronto.

The Fair Wage Office has reported that Toronto Metropolitan University has indicated that they have reviewed and understand the Fair Wage Policy and Labour Trades requirements and have agreed to comply fully.

## **CONTACT**

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

Marianne Gonzalez Angulo, Acting Manager, Purchasing Client Services, Purchasing and Materials Management Division, (416) 338-3109, [Marianne.GonzalezAngulo@toronto.ca](mailto:Marianne.GonzalezAngulo@toronto.ca)

## **SIGNATURE**

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Farshad Kajouii  
Interim Chief Technology Officer

Geneviève Sharkey  
Chief Procurement Officer