

## Hotspot in a cold spot

**For \$60 a month, residents of Nunavut's remote communities can stay connected to the outside world with satellite broadband**

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Even the southernmost town in Nunavut is still far enough north to be completely isolated.

The small hamlet of Sanikiluaq is located at the northern tip of the finger-like Belcher island chain in Hudson Bay, and – like the other 27 communities in the territory – the only way in or out is on a plane.

As Robert MacLean tells it over a echoy satellite phone, any sort of travel to and from home for something like a trip to the bank in the capital of Iqaluit 1,000 km away costs \$5,000.

“I have two bank accounts set up for my two businesses and setting them up took me almost a year,” says Mr. MacLean, who works at the local housing authority. “I did it all by fax and it takes forever.”



[Enlarge Image](#)

Inset: Equipment used to deliver broadband Internet to Nunavut's 26 communities sits in Repulse Bay. Nunavut's broadband network, QINIQ, provides wireless service to more than 4,000 homes and businesses. (Front) Steven Kanayok and Christine Tootoo of Rankin Inlet look at Google Earth for the first time at QINIQ's launch in 2005. (*P Leaton/For the Globe and Mail*)



Fortunately for him, the Internet has made things like banking a lot easier.

The emergence of broadband Internet in Nunavut has transformed the territory for its 29,000 people. From Nunavut's biggest community, (Iqaluit, population 7,500) to its smallest, (Grise Fiord, pop. 200), anyone – resident or business – can sign up for the service for a subsidized \$60 a month, rates not that different from those in Canada's large cities.

Ottawa's David Smith, president of Northern Broadband Development Corporation (NBDC), is largely responsible for wiring Nunavut.

Mr. Smith was hired by the federal government to set up communications and IT for the new government of Nunavut when it was formed in 1999. He quickly saw how important it was to get access to the rest of the communities.

In 2004, Mr. Smith applied to the federal government for funding and contracted rural communications experts SSI Mirco and local community workers such as Mr. MacLean to help establish the service.

At the time, Mr. Smith expected to be able to sign up as many as 2,000 customers by 2013. Instead, he reached

that point after several months.

Today, Nunavut's broadband network, QINIQ, provides wireless service to more than 4,000 homes and businesses in Nunavut. Mr. MacLean's home town of Sanikiluaq has a 95-per-cent penetration rate.

"It beat every optimistic projection we had, and then some," says Mr. Smith. "In Nunavut, every community is a fly-in community ... The Internet isn't subsidized anywhere else, [but] you don't have to get on an airplane to get to a bank."

The broadband link to the rest of the world has had an impact on commerce, as well. Some residents have used their Internet connections to sell things like Inuit carvings or animal pelts online.

Working at the small Sanikiluaq airstrip, Mr. MacLean was able to sell thousands of local soapstone carvings and thought he could do even brisker business for the local artisans with the help of the Internet. A few years ago, his only option was to dial long distance to Iqaluit and use a dial-up connection. But his monthly bill would be about \$1,500.

To supplement his costs, he shared his connection with in the community, but rarely broke even.

"I did that for about two years and then I was contacted by NBDC and I was asked if I would be interested in joining the task force that was bringing broadband into Nunavut. I thought, 'Gee, you mean I'm actually going to make a bit of money?' Yeah, it was fantastic," he said.

Of course, it was a challenge to get the system up and running said Ryan Walker, CEO of SSI Micro. His 16 employees had to cover an area the size of Western Europe.

"The North is a hard place to build. The land is rugged, it's very expensive and the weather is brutal. We developed a model where there is someone local who can speak the language, who can offer the service and tech support," he said.

"We're kicking about \$1-million back into the Nunavut community and that is probably why it is so successful, because of that local community element."

Leonie Pameolik, the community service provider for QINIQ for Coral Harbour (pop. 770) said she has about 150 to 170 clients. She said the social aspect is even more important for her clients.

"Family members are able to keep in touch when they live in other towns. We don't feel so isolated. More so for the younger kids than the older people. My kids have friends all over the place, even though they've never actually met them. Facebook and Beebo are really big," she said.

Of course, the system isn't perfect. The connection is much slower than what most of the rest of Canada enjoys because of the limited bandwidth capacity. Residential plans range from 256 Kbps to 512 Kbps, and the business plan is 768 Kbps.

"We have to get the most bang for our buck. Things we use like transparent caches, traffic prioritization all have to do with keeping bandwidth conservation and optimization in mind," said Walker.

Mr. Smith said NBDC has been a victim of its own success and he is applying for more funding to increase services.

"At the end of three years we have 4,000 subscribers. No one thought it would be this successful. Our highway is congested and we need some more lanes on it. It starts very early in the morning and it is full of traffic until very late at night. We simply need more lanes on our only highway," Mr. Smith said.

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