

Acadian Peninsula set to be Internet leader

■ \$44M program announced to extend broad-band service to 90 per cent of province by the end of 2005

By ROD ALLEN
TIMES & TRANSCRIPT STAFF

Premier Bernard Lord wants New Brunswick to be a global leader in the digital economy, and the Acadian Peninsula is already following his lead.

Two mayors from the region attended a morning news conference at Moncton's Dr. Georges-L. Dumont Regional Hospital yesterday, where Industry Minister Allan Rock and Premier Lord officially announced a \$44-million program to extend broad-band Internet service to 90 per cent of the province by the end of 2005.

The *peninsula* is one of 12 predominantly rural regions — one from each province and the two territories — selected by Industry Canada in 2000 to participate in the federal Smart Communities Program.

The demonstration projects are part of a federal initiative to place Canada as a global leader in the knowledge-based economy by helping sparsely populated regions develop information and communications technologies.

Three years in, the plan is starting to take shape in the province's north, say Ste-Isidore Mayor Norbert Sivret and Paquetville Mayor Nancy Lainey-Thériault.

"As a result of the program, 14 of our communities are already hooked up to one another via the intra-net (an enhanced form of e-mail usually available only for inter-departmental communications under one roof) and we are developing new expertise in this field," said Sivret.

"We believe similar regions elsewhere in the Francophonie (the 52-member global community of French-speaking nations) are interested in this technology and we will be able to market it world-wide."

Sivret said one of the local project's officers is, in fact, meeting with French officials in Paris this week with that goal in mind, and he expects wider interest now that France is involved.

People on the peninsula, struggling for years with the cyclical nature of the region's resources-based economy, see Smart Communities as the road to a new economy, said Lainey-Thériault.

"We already have 40 people in Paquetville directly employed by the program and people here see it as the future," said Lainey-Thériault. A few weeks ago, the Shippagan campus of l'Université de Moncton hosted Franco-Tech, an information forum for people and businesses interested in developing information technology. They were expecting maybe 100 people, but 250 showed up."

Sivret said under the program, all schools in the region and its 28 Community Access Centres are already furnished with high-speed internet service, so the federal program announced yesterday will have a solid base to work from.

Rock said yesterday that 54 per cent of the province already has broad-band access to high-speed Internet service, but this has

Quick facts

■ Aliant has already invested \$90 million over the past five years equipping the province with broad-band Internet access, according to CEO Jay Forbes.

■ Broad-band access can develop everything from new medical technology to on-line entertainment industries for New Brunswick.

■ According to Premier Bernard Lord New Brunswick will be the most connected province or state in North America by early 2006, making it the most advanced region in the world.

■ The Smart Community Project on the Acadian Peninsula started with five municipalities in 2000 and now includes 14.

■ High-speed Internet service packages average around \$40 monthly for single-computer users.

been extended mainly to the cities and towns through the normal competitive process among providers in the relatively higher-profit areas.

Government help was required to move the service into relatively sparsely populated, lower-return, higher-risk regions, so a public-private partnership was formed among Atlantic Canadian communications provider Aliant and the provincial and federal governments.

Industry Canada spokesman George Richard said under the partnership, Ottawa is contributing \$16.5 million — \$12.5 million of that amount from New Brunswick's share of the annual Canada Strategic Infrastructure Fund — Fredericton \$12.5 million and Aliant the remaining \$15.6 million, with the expectation of recovering its investment through customer service charges.

Richard wouldn't identify the competitors, but said Aliant was chosen for the partnership among a field of "six or seven" providers under an open-bidding process in which tenders were invited in the spring of 2003.

Richard said Aliant is a good choice as a partner in the program, given that NB Tel has been developing expertise in communications technology for sparsely populated regions for many years.

NB Tel was a globally recognized leader in the field long before the Atlantic merger with its counterparts in P.E.I., Nova Scotia and Newfoundland formed Aliant in the mid-1990s.

Aliant CEO Jay Forbes told a crowd of about 50 people gathered at the news conference that under the program, the company intends to have high-speed Internet available to 90 per cent of residences, 95 per cent of businesses and 100 per cent of all medical service providers by the end of 2005.

To illustrate the benefits of that last item, onlookers watched yesterday as a hospital official conversed in the room on-screen with Frank Despres, a kidney patient in Miramichi.

Despres and nurse Sharon Benoit talked about his illness in French from the Miramichi Medical Centre converted from the old Kinsmen School in the former Miramichi community of Chatham, as the Dumont conducted an up-to-the minute monitoring of his treatment shown on a separate screen.