

ORAL QUESTION—KEVIN O'REILLY, MLA FRAME LAKE
QUESTION 261-19(2): Delivery of Improved Internet Services
August 12, 2019

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. My question is for the Minister of Finance responsible for the Mackenzie Valley fibre optic link. My statement earlier today recounted how the expense was justified to this House as a means of connecting our communities to faster and more reliable Internet services. All of the references portray the project as delivering high speed Internet services in the communities, not a mile away with \$1 million hook-up cost. Can the Minister explain why the promised improvements to Internet services in the communities along the fibre link has not happened? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Member for Frame Lake. Minister of Finance.

HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yes, Mr. Speaker, the Mackenzie Valley fibre link is essentially the highway that makes it possible for these communities to have access to high speed Internet. Without that highway, there would be no opportunity for these communities to have access. Right now, Fort Simpson, Wrigley, Tulita, Norman Wells, Fort Good Hope, and Inuvik, all have a point of access inside those communities, directly inside those communities. The GNWT, the role that we had was in terms of providing that highway. We are the owner of that highway. We are not the Internet service provider, so we're not necessarily, then, going to take it from the point of access and run the line into somebody's home.

We are, however, also a consumer inside those communities, meaning that we take it from the point of access in the community, bring it into schools, bring it into healthcare centres, and bring it into government offices. Quite frankly, Mr. Speaker, there has been tremendous improvement because the ability of all of those government services now is to access high speed Internet. It is in those communities. We are not the service provider. We are also an advocate to support the Internet service providers so that they can, then, provide that last mile of connectivity between the point of access into homes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR. O'REILLY: I want to thank the Minister for that. I agree with her assessment, but the problem was that this project was sold to the House, to the public, as a way to allow for individuals, households in the communities to get access to high speed Internet. It hasn't panned out. Given that the promise was to have services in the communities, what steps will the Minister take now to deliver on that promise and literally go the extra mile to ensure that the improvements of Internet service actually happen?

HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK: In addition to being the owner of the main highway that brings that link all the way up and brings that point of access and, in addition, being the consumer that helps make it attractive to Internet service providers once they're in that community, there are two other roles, I think, that the government is playing and must continue to play, and needs

to, certainly, do a very good job of playing as we've all realized how important Internet services are in our homes. That is as an advocate and as a supporter.

As an advocate, both at the federal government level, in terms of going in, this is a priority for the federal government, as well. It is important that they understand and realize that this is going to leave us behind if we don't have access to Internet in the homes of everyone. It is not enough to have it at the school; you need to now have it in your home, as well. We are an important advocate. I spoke earlier, very recently, at the federal finance committee's opportunity to speak there, and this is one of the things that I recommended to them, is that they must make good on that promise to bring Internet and broadband into the homes in communities across the North.

The other one is as a supporter who is working with the private corporations who are the Internet service providers to ensure that they have the opportunity to make the right connections, whether it's community connections, that they have the opportunities to go into those communities, that we can assist them with whatever supports they need so that they can then be the Internet service providers in those communities.

MR. O'REILLY: I want to thank the Minister for that explanation. We have seen during the pandemic how the limitations and problems with Internet access in all NWT communities has hampered communications, especially for distance education and people trying to work from home. While the Mackenzie Valley fibre link may help some communities, clearly, it is not going to link all of our remote communities either. Can the Minister tell us if there is a plan to improve Internet connectivity in the NWT comparable to southern Canada and, if not, when will that plan be ready?

HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK: The Mackenzie Valley fibre link is certainly one part of it. Making the connection up to Tuktoyaktuk is another. Looking at what other areas of connectivity we can work with. For instance, the road currently to Whati is another point where we want to look at what we can be doing as a supporter and as an advocate to make sure that we're using all those opportunities to get the basis, to get the fundamentals there available for those Internet service providers.

The plan, if we're going to be having a plan, is much more than just what the government can do. It's going to have to engage and look at what the Internet service providers are going to be able to do, what is private industry going to be able to do, because, again, the government is not in the business of running a line from the point of access into the homes. I certainly will commit to looking at that so that we are engaging differently, but I don't want to make any bones about it. This isn't a plan for the government to run the lines from the point of access to the home. It's a plan to make sure we have the point of access, and then to have a plan to engage, to support, and to advocate to get those lines into those homes.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Minister. Final supplementary, Member for Frame Lake.

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, monsieur le President. I want to thank the Minister for that. I don't think she actually answered my question about when we're actually going to see a plan. The Minister knows well my views on megaprojects that Cabinet keeps pushing. I have made no bones whatsoever about that, but if there is one project that I think we can all get behind, it's improving Internet connectivity in the NWT. All of us can get behind that. It is something I think that the federal government is ready to move on, ready to fund us, but we need the plan. Can the Minister commit to making improved Internet connectivity across the NWT the highest priority for this government, especially when approaching the federal government for infrastructure investments? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK: I am certainly not going to speak for the whole of the Assembly and determine which of our priorities ranks above one or the other, but I think every Member here who has experienced the last two months of working from home and working remotely knows how important Internet connectivity is. As we're going forward, we are not entirely out of the weeds in terms of COVID. People are going to continue to rely on digital communication. It is obvious that this item is a priority, and it already was a priority of the Assembly. I'm not, as I say, going to rank it above the others, but I certainly can assure the Member that, when we are having our federal Ministers meetings, out of all departments, that this idea of broadband, the importance of having digital access, is being raised across the board. It will continue to be raised, and I really have no difficulty, certainly, in making that commitment, that we have raised it and will continue to do so. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.