

EORN updates Wollaston council on Cell Gap Project

By Mike Riley

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Wollaston Township council received an update from the Eastern Ontario Regional Network at their meeting on May 9. Communications director Lisa Severson and CEO of EORN's administrative division Jason St. Pierre were on hand to brief council on these new developments and what is yet to come by the time the project is slated to be completed by the end of 2025. At their meeting on May 9, Wollaston Township council welcomed St. Pierre and Severson from EORN to give an update on the area's Cell Gap Project. Mayor Michael Fuerth introduced them and invited them to proceed with their presentation. St. Pierre began by giving an overview of the Cell Gap Project. He told council that approximately 312 existing sites were being upgraded to supported LTE phones as well as 5G, and of those, approximately 297 were now complete. Around 261 new sites are being built and at this point 13 of the sites are now in service. He also said that approximately 73 sites will be located on existing towers of other service providers, and of those, 27 are now in service. St. Pierre said that they will meet or exceed project goals and that service level agreements are in place for five years to ensure capacity is maintained. The work is scheduled to be completed by 2025. St. Pierre next detailed the benefits of the project to council, including; closing coverage gaps to help people stay connected, increased capacity on the network, improved public safety (911 calls), improved municipal services, improved economic opportunities and tourism experience, and new towers that allow for future deployment of fixed wireless and new technology rollouts. The goals of the Cell Gap Project are to have 99 per cent coverage for people who live, work and travel on major roadways to make and receive phone calls, 95 per cent coverage for people who live, work and travel on major roadways for standard definition service level for email, web browsing and social media services, and 85 per cent coverage for people who live, work and travel on major roadways for high-definition service level for video conferencing, movie streaming, and other more data sensitive applications. As to why additional towers need to be added to the network, St. Pierre said that as technology evolves and community needs increase for these types of services, additional towers are needed to meet these challenges. "Also, here in the Canadian Shield where we live, there's a lot of peaks and valleys, white pines, lakefronts, etc. that cause interruptions with that topography, so added towers are needed to cover these types of territories. Additional towers are required to close those gaps to ensure we have that seamless connectivity and can provide cell service, Internet and HD services, especially if you're travelling and you're on calls, so we have that so it hands off tower to tower with no drops in calls," he says. Most towers will range in height from 60 to 90 metres, and will not be camouflaged as that negatively impacts service capability, causes detrimental environmental impact with shedding of plastic needles and doubles the cost. Towers will immediately support both 4G and 5G and will be ready for tomorrow's technological add-ons when they transpire. The antennae are the height of a door, and equipment is generally attached to the tower before it is lifted into place by a crane. Upgrades will be attached to the same antenna equipment and will be winched into place or done so by a crane, according to St. Pierre. Severson told council that the building process for the towers takes between 12 to 24 months, depending on how long it takes to find a site, and that it was challenging to find alternate sites at times with the process that's involved, especially with a 2025 completion date. "When we talk about capacity, I know it's sometimes hard to wrap your head around that, but for example when we have power outages and we're out for a number of days, people don't have access to their broadband, so a lot of people will jump on the phone trying to figure out when they're getting their hydro back. And everyone is using that cell tower to get that broadband information, so it overloads towers and sometimes it doesn't work. So adding those extra towers will help with coverage gaps and capacity," she says. St. Pierre said that there were four tower upgrades and four tower builds in Wollaston that have been completed, no co-locations, and four towers that need land use authority, that are yet to be built. He added that this data was current as of April 15, but could be subject to change. Outlining the steps to tower construction, St. Pierre said that first they need to find a property that meets the needs of the network, second they negotiate a lease, third they conduct archaeological and natural heritage assessments of proposed sites, fourth they follow the Land Use Authority process with municipalities, fifth they notify the province that the site is ready to proceed and finally site preparation, ordering and delivery of supplies for construction to commence. All the while, they consult with Indigenous communities throughout the project's duration. St. Pierre told council that EORN has been delegated the duty to consult with 18 Indigenous communities and organizations by the Crown. "EORN is dedicated to working closely with Indigenous communities and organizations and addressing their concerns about the Cell Gap Project's impact on territorial and treaty rights. EORN and the EOWC believe that the project's benefits must extend to both municipal and Indigenous communities in eastern Ontario. To that end,

we've completed archaeological and natural heritage assessments on 129 new tower sites up to now, and we've had over 120 meetings and phone calls with Indigenous communities and organizations. We've also developed training documents to assist staff in the field," he says. St. Pierre said that municipalities play a key role as they're responsible for land use authority for these new tower builds. The LUA process has been completed by Rogers Communications on half the planned tower sites and will continue to work with them to obtain approval for the remainder of the sites. "After the LUA approvals, municipalities work with Rogers to move the project forward by processing applications in a timely manner. EORN has created resource documents for municipal use and can help out where possible. These resource guides are available at www.eorn.ca/towersiting," he says. Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada has the ultimate authority to approve these tower placements under the Radiocommunications Act, and according to St. Pierre, ISED generally favours having the telecom service provider, in this case Rogers, the local public and the land use authority work together to achieve consensus with regard to an equitable tower placement. "Under ISED procedures, if either the LUA or TSP believes discussions have reached an impasse, either can formally request departmental intervention concerning a reasonable and relevant concern," he says. For concerns that are relevant and those considered not relevant by ISED regarding tower placement, please visit their website at www.ised-isde.canada.ca. For the financial perspective, St. Pierre told council that there had been an over \$300 million investment in eastern Ontario before in-kind contributions and community investment. He then outlined where the funding for the Cell Gap Project had come from; \$71 million from the Ontario government, \$70,981,235 from the federal government, \$10,123,699 from the Eastern Ontario Wardens' Caucus and the Eastern Ontario Leadership Council, and a minimum \$150 million from Rogers. "Hastings County contributed \$509,573 and has earned \$38,218 in interest. Their return on investment is estimated at about 50:1 to 80:1 upon completion of the project," he says. EORN's 2023 initiatives, pending EORN board approval, are planning to build 80 to 85 new towers and co-location builds, having most of the upgrades to existing towers with 5G completed, having a new board in place in April, collaborating with the Eastern Ontario Wardens' Caucus and the Eastern Ontario Leadership Council on joint initiatives like affordable housing and permitting, and working on a regional municipal approach to address cyber security gaps. St. Pierre and Severson completed their presentation and Fuerth and council thanked them for the information they presented and for the important work they were doing to boost economic development and tourism potential with this enhanced cell coverage. Council had a few questions on the placement of towers, health concerns, coverage issues and dispute resolution that St. Pierre and Severson answered. Deputy Mayor Paul Ordanis thought the presentation was informative and everything appears to be on track. Councillor JD Fentie concurred, and was glad to see the initiative moving forward. Severson told Bancroft This Week on June 1 that they were glad to have had the chance to provide Wollaston Township council with an update about the EORN cell gap project. "We appreciate councils such as Wollaston Township council showing an interest in the important work EORN is doing on improving cell service in their municipality and for all municipalities in the eastern Ontario region that are participating in the project," she says. "We encourage other councils to reach out to us if they have questions about connectivity as well."