



MAKING CONNECTIONS

High-speed internet is a game-changer in southern Manitoba

They've spent the last few years working to provide Winkler with some of the fastest high-speed internet connections in the country.

Now, telecommunications firm Valley Fiber Ltd. is poised to extend that reach even further, bringing its highly touted fiber optic connectivity to 27 communities in southern Manitoba.

As with Winkler's world-class hook-ups, the new infrastructure rollout is aimed at improving quality of

life and bolstering economic productivity, while also stimulating tech-sector interest in the Pembina Valley region – until now a tough sell on account of its spotty internet service and slow connection speeds.

“We're from Winkler – we go to school here, we do business here, and this is where our families live,” says Conley Kehler, senior vice-president at Valley Fiber.

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Instead of multi-point shared connections, every Valley Fiber home has a dedicated single-strand hookup, drastically improving signal strength and speed.

The company first announced its high-fiber diet for Winkler in 2017, through a deal that saw the city pay \$500,000 for single-strand hook-ups to all civic buildings, in exchange for free fiber connections to all households and non-city-owned buildings.

Unlike point-to-multipoint fiber networks – a shared process where one strand is sent to a neighbourhood, then split and shared among multiple locations – Valley Fiber will send single strands directly from its data centre to every home and business in Winkler, drastically improving signal strengths and speeds.

“We don’t use the terms ‘up to,’ we use the term ‘guaranteed,’ ” says Kehler. “We can guarantee your speed 24/7, whatever package you buy.”

By the end of this year, the company will have 2,000 “lit” customers in Winkler, with agreements in place to begin deploying backbone fiber to nearby communities – among them Altona, Morris and Montcalm – thanks to \$10.3 million in funding through the federal government’s Connect to Innovate program.

“Now what that doesn’t do is bring fiber to the home,” says Kehler of the federal funding, coverage of which ends at city and town limits. “That’s why we’re working with local municipalities to top up the 75 per cent of that funding and make it 100 per cent, then we want to bring it into those communities to actually physically connect homes and business in those areas.”

To help make its case, Valley Fiber has been connecting with economic development officers in areas where the backbone will hit, explaining how the high-speed access

will have positive impacts on the area’s well-established manufacturing sector, while positioning the corridor as a contender for investment from new markets.

“What this region hasn’t been able to offer is tech positions,” says Kehler. “The technology sector has not been allowed to move into one of the fastest growing populations in Canada – the Winkler-Morden corridor – so that has basically been off the table. But it’s now available to these communities, to make the offer to companies to move into these areas and do business.”

And Kehler is quick to point out the myriad other benefits to be gained once residents and public institutions are better connected – with potentially life-saving impacts on health care.

“We have good health care in southern Manitoba, but we don’t have good internet to back it up,” he says. “Often it’s an hour trip to Boundary Trails or Altona, or an hour into Winnipeg. But in small communities like St. Jean Baptiste or Plum Coulee, what could it look like for them to have small clinics with high-definition options for remote doctors to do diagnosing?”

In the short-term, the company’s plan is to build out the Connect to Innovate program over the next two years. As for the long-term? Kehler says expansion plans go well beyond the valley.

“There are some irons in the fire, to bring our product to a larger base than just southern Manitoba,” he says.

“We’re talking country-wide. We think we can take what we’ve designed here in Winkler and cookie-cut it into any community in Canada.” ■