

October 10, 2023

Re: EX8.8 ConnectTO Program Update: City Assets for Efficiency and Connectivity

Dear Mayor Olivia Chow and City Council Members,

We are writing to you today to express our support for the ConnectTO recommendations and call on you for all city assets, including the TTC, to be leveraged for ConnectTO, and for the City to develop a framework to optimize network digital infrastructure across City-owned and/or developed facilities.

In an increasingly digital world, access to information has become more of a necessity than a luxury. This means that access to affordable high-speed internet, like other utilities, needs to be a public good—one that is accessible, reliable, and meets the needs of the city's residents. As the city staff report suggests, the City can take critical steps in bridging the digital divide and making access to the internet, a keystone in infrastructure development.

The need for everyone to have access to the internet has been a reality for many years but became clear during the COVID-19 pandemic and its subsequent lockdowns. Reliable affordable internet connections were integral to remote learning for students, access to remote work and public health information, connecting with doctors and loved ones, and so much more. However, we know that the internet is too expensive for many households. In 2021, 34% of households in the city reported having difficulty making their monthly internet bills, and the majority of those struggling to make their payments are low-income, newcomer, single parent, and Black and racialized Torontonians. Canada currently has the 2nd most expensive internet among the G7 countries for speeds over 41 Mbps.

Internet-access is an equity issue and building publicly-owned fiber infrastructure and bridging the digital divide is crucial to making our city more equitable. Publicly owned fiber in all new buildings would play an important role in ensuring all low- and moderate-income people have access to affordable internet. Other levels of government have some programs, but these programs are not universal, voluntary, and are often not adequate for the current needs of low and moderate-income people living in the modern, digitally focused economy. Access to the internet ought to be a human right, and the City of Toronto has an important and unique role to play in integrating internet connectivity into its existing infrastructure and future projects.

Transit is an important feature of this work, as public wifi in TTC subway tunnels will make riders feel safer. Given that the TTC was not included as one of the agencies consulted for this report, we would urge City Council to include all of the TTC's assets and future transit infrastructure projects in ConnectTO's plan. This includes leveraging opportunities provided by new transit construction to install public fibre as well as ensuring publicly-owned fibre is installed in existing TTC tunnels.

Further, we support the expansion of access to paid data from Rogers to all major carriers but free Wi-Fi on the TTC including the subway tunnels would make this one step more inclusive to the many people in Toronto who struggle to pay their bills. Low-income people across the city need free wifi on the TTC.

We call on City Council to vote in favour of taking this next step in bridging the digital divide and adopting a city-wide strategy in developing publicly owned broadband infrastructure and fibre to enable Torontonians to have access to affordable and free internet.

Sincerely,
Toronto ACORN
Progress Toronto
TTC Riders

