

NORTH ON VERGE OF TECHNOLOGY EXPLOSION

BY Heidi Ulrichsen

New internet technologies are the wave of the future in Northern Ontario, the chief executive officer and president of Bell Canada told a well-heeled audience of community and business leaders

Thursday.

"The change occurring in the communications industry will dovetail in a powerful way with your needs . . . and just as important, with your aspirations," said Michael Sabia. "We are making sure that people in the north no longer just have to make do."

Sabia delivered the 2004 Contact North/*Contact Nord* Technology address Thursday to a sold out crowd of business, education, health care, government and community leaders at the Ramada Inn.

Contact North/*Contact Nord*, which supports Northern Ontario education through new technologies, brought Sabia in to talk about the importance of technology to northern communities.

"Technology is the great equalizer," says Geoffrey Lougheed, a member of Contact North/*Contact Nord*'s board of directors. "It makes sure that a kid in James Bay is as much of a success as a kid in Toronto."

Internet protocol, which allows virtually any electronic device to connect to another, will soon come into its own in the north, says Sabia. The lack of development in Northern Ontario may actually make this occur sooner, he says.

"Evolving technology will continue to change the landscape of the industry," says Sabia. "And in many cases, the north, not encumbered with outdated networks, will be able to leapfrog directly to the smartest, simplest, most advanced technologies."

Sabia believes technology improves the quality of life in northern communities. He points out the

advantages of medical teleconferencing in rural areas.

"Imagine a television screen. On that screen the face of a man about to have a doctor examine his throat," says Sabia. "Only the patient is in Pond Inlet, and the doctor is examining him by video conference from his office in Iqaluit, far removed in miles and travel time."

He dismisses audience concerns that bandwidth requirements for northern videoconferencing are simply too high.

"We are going to be using dedicated networks," he says. "It's amazing how much information can get down a fibre. I don't think it's going to be an issue."

Bell Canada is also looking into organizing a 2005 Northern Communities National Conference to address technology access issues, says Sabia.

That's good news, said Greater Sudbury Mayor David Courtemanche

"I am pleased about the major conference for northern communities in 2005," he said. "I just spoke to Mr. Sabia and let him know that our city would be happy to help and to host the conference."

Sudbury has been relying on technology to improve the quality of life for several years, says Courtemanche.

"We have developed a local film industry, with Chilly Beach being produced right here in Sudbury," he said.

"We now have our own medical school. Without information technology, our virtual medical school would not be possible."