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LONG-DISTANCE RATES WILL FALL: BELL

Bell Canada official addresses Sudbury gathering

By Harold Carmichael

By mid-2005, Ma Bell could give residents in outlying communities in the City of Greater Sudbury a break on the long distance charges they now pay to call parts of the city.

"That's something that's already being discussed by the commission (Canadian Radio, Television and Telecommunications Commission – CRTC) and us," said Michael Sabia, Bell Canada Enterprises' (BCE) chief executive officer, in an interview after a speech Thursday in Sudbury. "The communities of Ottawa, Hamilton and Sudbury are involved."

"As the commission works through this, it will happen probably in sequence, I think it would be a reasonable expectation to see changes over a period of time."

"I can't promise you yet, but maybe in a year or so. It's certainly an issue we are aware of."

Sabia was in town to give the 2004 Contact North/*Contact Nord* Technology Address at the Ramada Inn. More than 250 people attended the luncheon event, sponsored in part by The Sudbury Star.

Contact North/*Contact Nord* is Canada's Largest Distance Education & Training Network, providing education and training opportunities to more than 100 communities across Northern Ontario.

Colleges, universities and school boards are able to get their courses to students in communities across the North via audioconference and videoconference.

The elimination of long distance charges within the new city has been a topic of much debate over the years.

At the moment, residents in the former City of Sudbury can call anywhere within the new city and not pay long distance charges. Even outside

communities, such as Espanola and Estaire, can be called toll-free.

It's a different story for residents in the former six outside municipalities. People in Capreol, for example, who call Garson have to pay long-distance charges even though Garson is closer to them than the old city (a free local call).

Sabia's 20-minute address was entitled A Moment of Opportunity: Delivering For Northern Communities in an Internet World. Present were mayors of the major Northeastern Ontario cities: David Courtemanche (Sudbury), Vic Power (Timmins), John Roswell (Sault Ste. Marie), Lynn Peterson (Thunder Bay) and Vic Fedeli (North Bay).

Broadband revolution

Sabia said BCE is taking steps to extend broadband service to more communities. Earlier this year, BCE proposed to the CRTC a three-year program to extend its service to more than 1,000 rural and remote communities at a cost of about \$150 million.

If the plan is approved, an additional 70,000 broadband service lines – almost 20,000 of which would serve First Nation communities – would be created.

In about a month, Telesat (a BCE company) will launch its Anik F2 satellite to provide high-speed, state-of-the-art Internet access across the country, Sabia added. The new satellite is designed to reach areas that are not adequately served by land-based technology.

"Today, it's a bit trite to say, but we are in an information society," Sabia told reporters. "So much of the access to opportunity is going to come from broadband networks."

"We have to get to a point where there is no digital divide that separates aboriginal communities from everyone else. I think we are getting there."

Canada has the second-highest broadband penetration in the world, only trailing South Korea. Canada's rate is twice that of the United States, Sabia told reporters.

During his speech, Sabia said the rapid advancement of Internet Protocol (IP) technology, which allows any device to connect to any other device to deliver information in any format over a single network, is resulting in productivity saving in the range of 40 per cent.

"In an IP world, it (multiple networks) all goes away," he said. "It collapses into a single router and a high-speed modem. A much simpler configuration but (with) much greater capability, including multimedia Internet capability."

"Not having IP in the future will be like not

having a telephone today. It is that powerful."

The full potential of IP in Canada, however, said Sabia, may not get realized due to the current telecommunications rules, which were created for a different telecommunications environment.

He called on Ottawa to change the rules to allow for IP to continue unhindered.

Sabia also said that stronger private and public partnerships will help ensure that telecommunication needs get met across the country.

He said that BCE is now looking to organize a Northern Communities National Conference to address the technology access issue from every possible perspective and have a clear set of priorities outlined by early 2005 to present to government.