

ST. ANNE, MANITOBA

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Voyageur Communications Co-operative

The Voyageur Communications Co-operative is located in Ste. Anne, Manitoba and currently provides high-speed wireless internet to over 335 households and businesses in the rural south-eastern region of Manitoba.

Rural communities often struggle with ensuring that the required range of service is available to the people who live there, including the provision of access to the Internet. The south-eastern part of Manitoba had been one such region which depends primarily on agricultural industries and holds many bilingual francophone communities. In rural communities, larger Internet service providers typically charge disproportionately higher service fees to maintain their profit margins and targets, and even in communities where satellite services are available, the bandwidth prices are often costly. Ultimately, it is those corporations that will decide if and when a community will gain access to the Internet, yet at the same time access to the Internet has become increasingly important for Canadians. Regions with limited or no internet connectivity

face a growing disadvantage.

It is in this context that in 2002, community members in St-Pierre-Jolys and Ste. Anne met with Conseil du développement économique des municipalités bilingues du Manitoba (CDEM) through a series of meetings and discussions about how to establish an enterprise that would effectively provide broadband Internet to the communities. They came to the consensus that they needed an Internet service provider that was community-owned and controlled, made it possible to work with a range of partners, anchored ownership and control in the community, and ensured that the linguistic and cultural needs of the francophone communities were met. The planning process began when a group of rural residents had a series of meetings and discussions about how to establish an enterprise that would effectively provide broadband internet to the communities. Naturally, the cooperative model suited their organizational needs, and the outcome was the incorporation of the →



➔ Rat River Communications Co-operative that would provide St-Pierre-Jolys and neighboring rural communities with affordable, community-owned broadband Internet services.

For the next five years, these rural communities received Internet service from this newly formed member-owned, consumer cooperative. Then in 2007, the co-operative decided to amalgamate with Illico, a community-based non-profit Internet supplier, as a measure to better serve their members by sharing resources, increasing their bandwidth, and broadening their service to more rural communities. The group decided to retain the cooperative model and renamed themselves the Voyager Communications Cooperative.

Voyager's membership presently consists of 400 rural households and businesses, serving over eight communities with Internet service that had limited or no Internet connectivity prior to the formation of the co-operative. Membership has been steadily increasing since amalgamation by approximately 10 members per month. Members join the co-operative by purchasing a five dollar share, and in return receive the installation of high-speed wireless Internet services in their household for an affordable rate. Through contractual agreements, the cooperative's telecommunication equipment is installed on surrounding communication towers. The staff of the co-operative take care of both the communications tower and individual member

installations. The day-to-day operation of the co-operative is carried out by two full-time employees, a manager and an installer, a part-time accounting & finance person and a part time network engineer.

The Internet services provided by the co-operative have had an immediate and direct economic impact on the region, and new business opportunities and innovation has developed. Many members value the ease of being able to do online banking — not

to mention the time and transportation cost savings — and others have created innovative small businesses from their rural homes with the services provided by the cooperative. For example, there is a growing number of computer technologists who now operate home-based businesses. Hytek Ltd., Canada's largest pork producer, is also using the services of the co-operative to monitor fifty-percent of their

barns online. Without the service, the company would have to relocate to better serviced areas. This, of course, would result in the loss of hundreds of local jobs.

This rural CED initiative is effectively connecting communities, both through broadband service and collective ownership of the business model. Access to information, improved services, job creation, local economic activity, and economic democracy are the results.

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