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Full speed ahead: Toronto's new waterfront communities get really wired up



The Canary District portion of Toronto's redeveloping eastern waterfront area will be a leading "intelligent community."

Waterfront Toronto/National Post

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Special to National Post

Are you a gamer, animator or Netflix enthusiast looking for new place to call home? If fast, unlimited and affordable bandwidth top your wish list, check out the condos and live/work spaces coming soon to Waterfront Toronto.

When moving trucks start rolling up to several condominium towers in the waterfront's East Bayfront and West Don Lands neighbourhoods, residents will get to tap in to the fastest and most economical ultra-high-speed Internet service in the city. That's 500 megabit-per-second (Mbps) unlimited, symmetrical Internet, where downloading and uploading are equally fast and fibre is delivered into every condo suite. The ultra-broadband, ultra-fibre-optic network will also hook residents to neighbourhood-wide wi-fi, IPTV and a community portal.

All this for \$60 a month, guaranteed for the next 10 years.

Dubbed an "intelligent community," it's the first network of its kind in Canada and 100% private-sector funded, and developers can't wait to watch it unfold.

"We've never had the opportunity with other developments to take advantage of something like this so we're very excited about it," says Christopher Wein, president of Great Gulf Residential that's building the 44-storey Monde condo tower adjacent to Sherbourne Common Park in East Bayfront. "Connectivity, the Internet, social media, and the way people work are extremely tied into high-speed Internet. It's very important not only for businesses and the community but it's also important for residents."

Clearly, the world has moved beyond accessing the Internet purely for email and work. As Mr. Wein explains, people are ditching cable TV and telephone landlines to absorb most of their content through mobile devices. And that's precisely what makes this extensive network so appealing.

"Whether it be a laptop, an iPad, some kind of a smartphone or a smart television, people are using the Internet to watch movies, TV shows, communicate with one another, share photo albums and videos, etcetera," he says. "... For that reason I think this [network] is a huge advantage."

It's also a boon for those working at home, particularly in the television, animation or post-production industries and any others that rely on large volumes of data or are heavy on data analytics.

"Things like really large files, like 3D movies, you can get those at the blink of an eye because of the technology we have at the waterfront," says Kristina Verner, Waterfront Toronto's director of intelligent communities. "It improves basic satisfaction with how you can be entertained. It allows for more on-demand type of services to happen. There's no data cap, no restriction of the amount you can consume."

Even as the network is being built out, it's already winning accolades. Last year it helped the City of Toronto earn the title of the world's No. 1 Intelligent Community of the Year as chosen by the Intelligent Community Forum in New York. That's not too shabby for a telecommunications company that has never been in the residential business before this project came along.

"We're probably the smallest company in Toronto that is building our own fibre cables in the ground," says Dan Armstrong, CEO of Beanfield Metroconnect that won the massive contract.

Beanfield has been delivering networks to commercial clients for 26 years, with 400 customers connected to its fibre network. The company built out Liberty Village's technology and media hub as well as a fibre-optic network in downtown Toronto servicing more than 200 office buildings. It's also providing network infrastructure for 2015 PanAm Games venues and the Athletes' Village.

"We'd always been toying around with this idea of getting into residential but it's a very challenging market because you need a lot of volume to justify the investment," says Mr. Armstrong, who values the contract at \$100 million over 20 years. "Just starting off doing it naturally, we'd never ante up enough volume to justify the capital cost to architect it, buy all the equipment, put all the back-end resources in place to support it, and all the stuff you need to build it. It's a huge capital investment. When the RFP [request for proposal] came out we said, 'Hey, there's probably enough volume to justify us taking a plunge into the residential market.' ... We poured our heart and soul into the architecture and submitted the RFP, and we did win!"

Still, the stakes are high. To ensure that Waterfront Toronto remains an IT powerhouse, it mandated that Beanfield must keep Toronto within the top seven intelligent communities in the world for the duration of the contract – that means 10 years past completion of the final condominium, with the monthly fee fixed for a decade, too.

The network is currently up and running at Urban Capital's River City tower and at the PanAm Games' Athletes Village (the latter is situated in Dream Unlimited's Canary district and will convert to 810 condos after the Games). It will roll out at Great Gulf's Monde, Tridel's Aqualina and Aquavista at Bayside, and three more Dream condominium projects as they're built. Wifi will spread to surrounding parks and public spaces.



A Beanfield truck in the Distillery District, working to get the entire area connected to the ultra-high-speed service. Peter J. Thompson / National Post

Businesses won't get left out, either. The network will extend to the Waterfront Innovation Centre, a 350,000-sq.-ft. commercial space being built by Menkes next to Canada's Sugar Beach. The centre is geared specifically at creative and technology sectors such as advanced visualization and interactive digital media, film and TV production, where ultra-high-speed and unlimited data will be especially welcome.

"We're really hoping we're going to get some people in there that want to do things and trial things that will only work on a very high-speed network," says Mr. Armstrong. "We want to turn the 'hood into a living lab. For example, if a broadcaster wants to test broadcasting 4K video, which is unheard of, we'd be able to trial it there because we have this infrastructure."

Adds Ms. Verner: "It takes technology out of the equation in terms of why can't you do certain things. It's a future-proofing strategy for the area."

No wonder developers are using the network as a marketing feature. But truth be told, it's just one of many reasons why Toronto's new waterfront neighbourhoods are garnering so much attention and attracting like-minded people.

"It's a combination of technology, the fact that it's green, there's lots of park space, there's high design in terms of the built form, there's investment in the public realm,"

says Jason Lester, Dream's senior vice-president of urban development. ... It's [close] to the Distillery District, to Corktown Common that acts as a trailhead to get to the Evergreen Brickworks and into the Don Valley trail system. When you start adding all those attributes, it's quite dynamic for a brand new community to be designed and developed and built out over such a short time — and so close to downtown Toronto.”