



## Connecting communities across the RDCK

### Utilizing Community Works funding to expand fibre optic infrastructure

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*By Dan Elliott, RDCK Communications Coordinator*

There is a quiet appeal to rural living—the slower pace, open spaces, and strong sense of community offer a welcome contrast to the rush and noise of urban life. Yet, in an increasingly digital world, the desire for that peaceful lifestyle often comes with the equally strong need to stay connected—to work remotely, access online services, keep up with news, or simply stay in touch with friends and family across the globe. It's a modern juxtaposition: seeking solitude and simplicity, while relying on the very technology that ties us to the wider world.

However, the challenge for those in rural areas is telecommunications companies are often reluctant to expand or upgrade services because low population density means limited customers, thin profit margins, and low returns on investment. Considering the private sector may have little incentive to serve these communities, governments have stepped up to ensure residents have access to reliable high-speed connectivity.

Over the last decade, all levels of government have called for more funding for rural internet and wireless services. In fact, the priority for the BC Government is to connect every household in the province to high-speed internet access. Locally the Regional District of Central Kootenay (RDCK) plays a vital role in advancing digital infrastructure, often serving as both facilitator and steward of public investment. Through strategic use of the Canada Community-Building Fund, administered through the Union of British Columbia Municipalities (UBCM), the RDCK Board has allocated over \$2 million in Community Works Funding over the last six year in Electoral Areas A, D, G, H, and K helping to drive the development of fibre optic backbone projects—critical infrastructure that supports high-speed internet access and future economic growth. By collaborating with trusted partners, Columbia Basin Trust's subsidiary Columbia Basin Broadband Corporation (CBBC) and the Kaslo infoNet Society (KiN), the RDCK is taking a cooperative approach not only to stretch public dollars further, but to accelerate progress toward more connected and resilient communities.

"The value of reliable, high-speed internet access cannot be overstated. It touches every aspect of our lives, from work and education to play and recreation," said the Honourable Stephen Fuhr, Secretary of State (Defence Procurement), and Member of Parliament for Kelowna. "Our government is proud to support increased fibre optic internet access in the Regional District of Central Kootenay, ensuring that more British Columbians have the internet speeds to work, play and connect in their communities."

The Slocan Broadband Connectivity Project started in March 2019 and was completed in March 2021. While the bulk of the funding was provided through the Province's Connecting British Columbia Program (\$3,378,000) and Columbia Basin Trust (\$3,301,000), RDCK Community Works provided \$343,000 in funding (\$304,000 from

Electoral Area H and \$40,000 from Electoral Area K) to the project, while the Villages of Nakusp, New Denver, Silverton and Slocan provided an additional \$182,000 in funding.

“This kind of leadership shows what’s possible when all levels of government work together to close the digital divide and build stronger, more resilient communities,” said Diana Gibson, Minister of Citizens' Services. “I’m pleased to see that the Columbia Basin Broadband Corporation, Kaslo infoNet Society and the Regional District of Central Kootenay are continuing to build on the province’s work to accelerate connectivity in rural communities.”

The project, which was completed by the project recipient CBBC, focused on building out the fibre optic backbone from Playmor Junction to the community of Shoreholme (north of Nakusp), including the construction of five points of presence (POPs). These POPs are physical locations in a network where different networks or communications devices connect. The RDCK has provided multiple POPs through the region, at fire halls, recreation centres, and offices. Approximately 5,200 households within close proximity to the POPs infrastructure were impacted.

“Reliable, high-speed connectivity is essential for communities to thrive—economically, socially and culturally,” said Johnny Strilaeff, President and CEO, Columbia Basin Trust. “That’s why Columbia Basin Trust has made broadband a priority. We value the strong collaboration with the Regional District of Central Kootenay and other local governments as we work together to expand fibre optic infrastructure across the Columbia Basin. Projects like the Slocan Valley and Nelson-to-Fruitvale fibre builds show what’s possible when regional vision and local action align. We’re excited to continue this work through the Connect the Basin project, which will bring fibre connectivity to more than 3,100 rural homes in the RDCK by 2027.”

As part of the Connect the Basin project that was co-funded by the Province, there was further Community Works Funding of \$1,545,285 that was allocated by the RDCK Board to develop and implement backbone and last mile fibre (brought right to the local community) for communities within Electoral Areas G, H, and K, as well as the Villages of Salmo, Silverton, and New Denver. Electoral Area G will contribute \$126,864, Electoral Area H will contribute \$288,020, and Electoral Area K will contribute \$100,212 per year for a three-year span from 2024 to 2026.



“Community Works funds have provided us the financial ability to partner with Columbia Basin Trust on the Connect the Basin project to connect rural, underserved households in our region with high-speed connectivity through fibre to the home,” said Walter Popoff, RDCK Electoral Area H Director. “This will provide access to reliable internet, which is now the new form of communication and a necessity for public safety, quality of life, economic growth, government services, and community development.”

The RDCK received funding from the federal and provincial governments through the Rural and Northern Communities Infrastructure stream of the Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program (ICIP-RNIS), for up to \$782,000 to bring submarine backbone lines (fibre optic cables laid in Kootenay Lake) to Riondel, Boswell, and Wynndel in Electoral Area A, while providing direct fibre optic internet service to RDCK facilities (water treatment, community centre, fire hall, and waste transfer station). The RDCK partnered with KiN, a local internet provider based in Kaslo and Electoral Area D, on the project. KiN started out providing internet service in the 1990’s, but since 2014 have been installing their own fibre optic network. KiN received funding through the Connecting British Columbia Program, to use the ICIP-RNIS funding to extend their fibre backbone from Johnsons Landing down the east shore to Pilot Point, then across to Balfour. The RDCK Board contributed an additional \$50,000 from Electoral Area D Community Works Fund towards the project which would help to provide last mile service to off grid communities along the east shore, impacting at least 30 residences.

KiN continues to build out the fibre network throughout Electoral Area D. Funding for the extension project was administered by the Connecting Communities BC program. The province contributed up to \$427,382 to this project. The intention is to complete the extension of the fibre backbone from Argenta, through Cooper Creek, to Meadow Creek, and Howser by 2026. As well, building out the network along the highway to the south, north and west of the Village of Kaslo, while addressing multiple pockets of new development along the highway between Ainsworth and Lardeau. In total the project is expected to provide fibre optic broadband service to at least 217 residents. For this portion of the project the RDCK Board allocated \$98,199 in Community Works Funding from Electoral Area D.

“As a non-profit society, KiN exists to bring service to some of the most remote communities in our region,” said Issac Maxfield, Kaslo infoNet Society, Executive Director. “The RDCK’s strong and early support has helped us set ambitious goals and reach areas that would otherwise be left behind. Highspeed connectivity is no longer a luxury, it is essential to modern life. Rural communities thrive when residents can take part in the digital economy, work remotely, and access vital services. Reliable internet also helps students stay engaged and succeed in school, while remote work opportunities contribute to long-term community resilience.”

“Our area has been extremely underserved and uncared for by the big telecom companies,” said Aimee Watson, RDCK Board Chair and Electoral Area D Director. “Fortunately, KiN has stepped up to fill in the gap for rural customers to provide this essential service. This has also created an economic impact with people moving to our community because they now have the ability to work remotely.”

Fibre service is expected to be available in both Riondel and Boswell by October 31, 2025. KiN will continue to build out their own network to increase coverage in Boswell and other east shore communities following the completion of this project.

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