



May 14, 2021

Ref: 267054

Mayors and Regional District Chairs of British Columbia
Attendees of May 2021 Regional Calls with Minister Josie Osborne and Minister Lisa Beare

Dear Mayors and Chairs:

Thank you for taking the time to join Minister Josie Osborne and Minister Lisa Beare for the May 2021 regional calls. As Minister Osborne and Minister Beare said, these conversations continue to be a great opportunity to hear from you about the key issues and opportunities that you are working on in your communities. This email answers some of your questions and details links and resources for some of the topics raised.

The May 2021 calls were focused on connectivity. Working to connect all people in BC – regardless of where they live – is a priority for our government. Communications technology in all its rapidly changing forms is embedded into all aspects of our day-to-day lives as it enables a broad spectrum of possibilities including access to healthcare, education, culture, public safety and economic activity, as well as day-to-day social interactions during the challenging times of the pandemic.

Building on the Province's most recent investments totalling \$180 million, Budget 2021 establishes stable **base funding** of \$40 million over the plan to further invest in the Province's connectivity strategy. This will provide better high-speed internet and cell coverage to help connect more people in rural areas and remote communities. (See more Budget 2021 highlights below.)

There were a number of themes that came up during the calls including inaccurate federal data on broadband internet speeds, cell coverage along highways, redundancy, and low earth orbit satellites (LEOS) as an alternative to ground infrastructure. Providing the same level of access, quality and affordability in rural and remote areas as in urban areas is a key priority for the provincial government and we are working towards that goal.

The [Connected Communities](#) team within the Ministry of Citizens' Services would be happy to answer any further questions regarding connectivity programs or planning, highway cellular, satellite services or any recent announcements pertaining to connectivity in your area. Please email ConnectedCommunititesBC@gov.bc.ca.

Internet Speed Study

Ministry of Municipal Affairs Local Government

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Communities have raised concerns that the federal data on broadband Internet speeds, which is used to determine eligibility for connectivity funding programs, may not accurately reflect the broadband Internet speeds experienced in homes, businesses, and other locations at the community level.

The Ministry of Citizens' Services, UBCM, and Northern Development Initiative Trust are responding collaboratively to these concerns with an [independent study](#) of differences between the broadband Internet speeds experienced in some BC communities, and the 50/10 Mbps speed identified on the federal government's National Broadband Internet Service Availability [Map](#). The study which is underway, will produce factual information on Internet speeds in rural and remote communities, supporting analysis and informing dialogue between the Northern Development Initiative Trust, Indigenous and local governments, Internet service providers, the Province, and the federal government. Data gathering and analysis will occur over the spring and summer months, with reporting of study results expected in fall 2021.

A **key step** in this process is to identify which communities in BC have noted inconsistencies between the 50/10 Mbps Internet speed that federal maps indicate should be available, versus actual Internet speeds currently experienced by residents and businesses in the area.

Local governments with reports of Internet speeds lower than the 50/10 Mbps speeds shown on federal maps, are invited to self-identify by contacting [Reiko Tagami](#), Policy Analyst, UBCM to request to be included in the study.

Local governments wishing to participate in the Internet speed study are encouraged to complete a [questionnaire](#), providing contextual and background information about Internet speeds experienced in their community. For the purpose of this study, local governments can improve the accuracy and depth of the Internet speed data for their area, by having their residents, businesses, and other community stakeholders complete the CIRA Internet speed test. More information on the Internet speed questionnaire & performance data can be found [here](#) .

BC Budget 2021 Highlights

On April 20, 2021, Finance Minister Selina Robinson tabled the 2021 provincial budget in the legislature. Budget 2021 includes significant new funding commitments of interest to local governments, including those for mental health and substance use; housing affordability and homeless populations; economic recovery; childcare, and broadband connectivity. Due to COVID-19 pandemic impacts, the budget projects deficits of \$9.7 billion this year, \$5.5 billion next year, and \$4.3 billion in the year following. For more information see provincial government's [Budget 2021](#) or [UBCM BC Budget Highlights](#).

Mental Health Funding and Substance Use

The budget allocates \$3.1 billion over three years to improve health and mental health care, including \$500 million to continue to expand mental health and substance use services. \$330 million over the fiscal plan provide a full spectrum of substance-use treatment and recovery services, including \$152

million for opioid treatment. There will be 195 new substance use treatment and recovery beds in communities throughout the province to help more people get on a path to recovery.

Housing Affordability and Homeless Population

The budget provides additional funding to expand the HousingHub program to construct 9,000 more rental homes for middle-income households and families over the next 3-5 years.

In addition to continued investments in the Homes for B.C. Supportive Housing Fund, the Province is partnering with the federal government through the Rapid Housing Initiative to convert existing buildings into supportive housing, and to support development of modular housing to expedite housing solutions for homeless or other vulnerable populations.

The budget allocates funding to extend supports and services for people experiencing homelessness and includes funding to help maintain more than 3,000 temporary emergency shelter and hotel spaces that have been secured during the pandemic. Funding is also provided to extend the additional 650 urgent shelter spaces, rent supplements, and supportive housing sites used to support recent decampments efforts in Vancouver and Victoria, with on-site health and other supports.

Economic Recovery

Budget 2021 continues to prioritize investments that help BC respond to the pandemic and to prepare for a strong recovery. These investments build on the over \$10 billion that has been provided to support people, businesses and communities since the pandemic began. The budget provides a record \$26.4 billion in taxpayer-supported capital investments that are expected to create over 85,000 jobs over the three-year plan. These investments will ensure the right infrastructure is in place by making critical upgrades to hospitals, schools, and highway and transit projects.

Childcare

The budget included a \$233 million increase in base funding over three years for childcare to create new spaces. This will more than double the number of \$10-a-day childcare spaces and contribute to raising wages for early childhood educators. New federal funding will help BC to build on this commitment.

Infrastructure Funding

Public announcements for the Investing in Canada Infrastructure COVID-19 Infrastructure Resilience Stream are expected next month. We understand that you are all interested in finding out the decisions. Ministry staff are working with our partners at Infrastructure Canada to finalize approvals at this time. Please stay tuned for further announcements.

In addition, Budget 2021 includes provincial funding commitments of \$41 million over the fiscal plan, or \$247 million over the next six years to maximize federal contributions and continue to support local governments, not-for-profit entities and First Nations in accessing community infrastructure funding.

The ministry will be communicating further details on the Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program (ICIP) application process for new intakes in the fall of 2021.

COVID-19 Update

The strengthened [province-wide restrictions](#) that came into effect on March 29 are still in place through to May 25, including that everyone should stay within their local communities. Travel restrictions for non-essential travel in BC are also in place until May 25. Read the travel restrictions [here](#).

Dr. Henry stresses that although a high number of people are being vaccinated every day, it will take some time before all of us can let our guard down and right now, we all need to continue doing the things that prevent transmission of the virus.

Please stay tuned for further announcements from Provincial Health Officer Dr. Bonnie Henry and check the [provincial government COVID-19 website](#) regularly for more information.

Vaccination Roll Out

Dr. Bonnie Henry and Minister of Health, Adrian Dix, urge everyone to [register](#) online or call 1-833-838-2323 for vaccination as soon as possible. Getting vaccinated will help stop transmission and infections in vaccinated people are generally milder compared to those in unvaccinated people.

Starting today at 7 p.m. (Pacific time), booking invitations will begin for people who are registered and are born in 1996 or earlier (25 and up). On Saturday at 7 p.m., booking invitations will begin for people who are registered and are born in 2001 or earlier (20 and up) and on Sunday at 7 p.m., booking invitations will begin for people who are registered and are born in 2003 or earlier (18 and up). We encourage you to share this information with your residents.

The latest vaccine information can be found at www.bccdc.ca.

Home Owner Grant Centralization

As a reminder, effective 2021 all home owner grant applications must be submitted directly to the BC provincial government through a secure online application. **Municipalities no longer need to and should not accept any applications.** There are no changes to program eligibility criteria.

Homeowners can apply for their current year or their retroactive home owner grants 24/7 online at gov.bc.ca/homeownergrant or they can call toll free: 1-888-355-2700 Monday to Friday from 8:30 am to 5 pm to speak with an agent. **We encourage you to share this information with your residents.**

The next regional calls will be in June. Ministry staff will be in touch with you about the June date, time, and meeting information. Our tentative plan after June is to take a summer break from these calls and restart them in September.

The more restrictive COVID-19 measures over the next few weeks are hard for all of us – for governments, for businesses, for individuals in communities throughout BC. Once again, I cannot thank you enough as local government leaders for your continued leadership and dedication during this difficult time.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "T. Faganello". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'T' and a long, sweeping underline.

Tara Faganello
Assistant Deputy Minister

pc: Chief Administrative Officers
Gary Maclsaac, Executive Director, UBCM
Nancy Taylor, Executive Director, LGMA
Todd Pugh, Executive Director, CivicInfo