

## First Mile Concept (<http://firstmile.ca>)

This document summarizes the concept of the First Mile in First Nations communities – what it is, why it is important for communities to be thinking about it now, how First Nations can put it into action, and what it could look like in the future. Different First Nations develop local broadband networks in ways that reflect the unique contexts of their individual communities. Locally owned networks support future development: local control means First Nations can decide what to do with these tools. For example, they may develop a local phone service using IP (Internet Protocol) phones, or even a local cellular phone network. FirstMile.ca showcases First Nations doing this work today.

Across Canada, First Nations are building broadband systems and using them to deliver services to their communities. But outside of major centres, many First Nations remain underserved. The federal and provincial governments provide limited and sporadic funding and support for connectivity in First Nations. But in many cases the ongoing support of local networks is still a challenge. Policies and funding programs are often generated in centralized institutions and government offices far from the needs and realities of local communities.

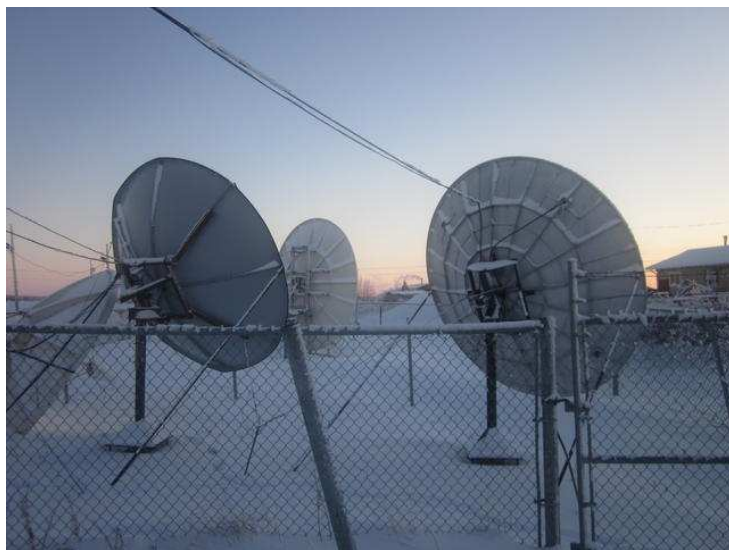


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Beginning in 1997, the Assembly of First Nations adopted several resolutions that support community-based technology and broadband development. The First Nation leadership recognize broadband systems are essential infrastructures supporting First Nations in closing health, economic, infrastructure, education and service gaps and create new economic opportunities. In 2010, the AFN created an e-Community ICT model highlighting the need for communities to secure broadband infrastructure and human resources. In December 2011, First Nation Chiefs-in-assembly passed a resolution for a First Nations e-Community Strategy. One

objective is to ensure First Nations control, own and maintain sustainable broadband systems.

“First Mile” refers to a relationship between a First Nation community and its local broadband system in which the First Nation is in control. It is reversing the way that telecommunications is traditionally developed to benefit the corporate telecom provider. Investments and development of the community infrastructure “first” ensures the backbone infrastructure will be developed to support community applications. First Mile concepts employ OCAP principles – ownership, control access and possession. OCAP applied to telecommunications has at least two implications. First, it entrenches First Nation rights to own and control local broadband networks to support the flow of community information and services. Second, First Nations retain access and possession of the capacity and resources to effectively manage the content, traffic and services that their network supports. This means local jobs!

Across the country, broadband infrastructure and networks are rapidly being developed on First Nations territories. First Nations governments require more broadband capacity to support delivery of their community services. Community organizations, businesses and households are driving demand as they increasingly use broadband. Many First Nations are now developing ownership and control over local networks and infrastructures. They recognize the relationships, structures and agreements put into place will shape how broadband systems are developed on their territories.

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A community putting First Mile concepts into action works closely with strategic partners. Their work involves two distinct but linked definitions of 'broadband.' Broadband is a community service –the wireless, fibre or cable networks that link together homes, businesses and organizations in the community and with the world at large. If First Nations control these broadband systems, they can manage them strategically to meet current and future needs. As well, broadband supports First Nations governments to deliver community services – administration, health services, schools and education, justice and policing and other services – to its members.

First Nations recognize that corporate telecom providers only deliver the minimum level of service at the maximum price possible. When public funds are available, telecom providers always make the required claims to governments to access these funds. But once the public funds are depleted, the level of service in the First Nations quickly returns to inadequate and insufficient levels. Using First Mile concepts, this situation is reversed and the infrastructure is owned and controlled by the community to support local economic development and social wellness. As First Nations invest in local services and infrastructure, there is a greater interest and desire by young people and their families to remain in their home communities to build and create new opportunities.

One step in the journey towards the First Mile is for any First Nation or group of communities to plan how they want to develop the local ownership and control of their broadband infrastructure. Local champions require a holistic vision for community broadband development that focuses on all the different community sectors. This step involves leadership opening a dialogue with community members, to learn how the community broadband system can effectively service everyone.

A broadband network can only be developed through strategic relationships with outside partners and collaborators. Knowing who the community and its services need to connect with and the online services available with these connections is part of the planning process. Key partners include regional organizations that provide broadband support services to First Nations. Most First Nations are already working with these organizations to support the networks servicing local schools and health centres. Strategic relationships are required with local, regional or national



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telecommunications companies that provide the community's connection to the outside. Finally, strategic agreements with the different levels of government provide development and operational funding. These relationships require two-way and mutually respectful communication. Without this, First Nations quickly experience top-down decisions being made by people with little or no understanding or appreciation for local needs and priorities. The challenge is to identify people in governments and telecom corporations who are open and responsive to First Nation visions.

**First Mile website:** <http://firstmile.ca>

The opportunity to share stories and experiences provides First Nations with a venue for learning and growing together. We are building a First Mile network of people and infrastructure to share best practices and lessons learned. The experiences of the early adopters of these tools and systems help create new opportunities for those starting their journey. The First Mile work is just beginning but has a long and healthy future. We are now gathering information about First Mile efforts and activities across Canada. Our group is conducting research with First Nations communities. Together we are writing and publishing papers describing how First Nations are putting First Mile concepts into action. The First Mile website has many resources. These include: the First Mile report; community videos, stories and publications; and a mailing list to help you stay informed. **Send us an email at [info@firstmile.ca](mailto:info@firstmile.ca) for more information, or to share your community's First Mile experiences.**