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Online learning projects squeezed out as Canada expands its wireless world

By KATE HAMMER

From Thursday's Globe and Mail

As it upgrades airwaves, Ottawa cuts funding for Web-based educational initiatives

It was a Robin Hood-type arrangement. Ten years ago, when an internet venture called Inukshuk was granted a slice of Canada's airwaves, the company agreed to share the profits with Web-based educational initiatives.

That partnership financed modest but important projects such as the development of an animated American Sign Language dictionary for children, and a on-line audio archive of Tlingit words and phrases.

But just as that band of the broadcast spectrum is about to be upgraded and the company - now jointly owned by Rogers and Bell - stands to increase its profits, the federal government has torn up the deal, halting millions of dollars for online learning.

The slice of electromagnetic real estate, or spectrum, known as the 2500 MHz band had been available for educational broadcasting for decades. In 2000, when Inukshuk won a licence from Industry Canada to use the spectrum, it pledged to honour that with a program it called the Learning Plan.

Earlier this month, however, the company, now called Inukshuk Wireless, told members of the committees that direct the profits that flow into the Learning Plan that the program had been cut.

In updating the company's licence to support 4G wireless services (think HDTV and multimedia messaging), Industry Canada said Inukshuk no longer has to continue channelling millions of dollars to the Learning Plan for on-line initiatives.

"Unfortunately, the Learning Plan is not included in the new licence conditions ..." the e-mail to the committee members said.

The company promised to honour financial commitments to on-going projects, but added that it would not introduce any new funding.

"We would like to understand the logic behind this new decision that removes any benefit to education," said John King, a member of Newfoundland and Labrador's Learning Plan advisory committee.

A spokesperson for Industry Canada told The Globe and Mail in an e-mail that during consultations on upgrading the spectrum, it was "proposed that the Learning Plan is no longer required."

Documents suggest that Inukshuk and Industry Canada agreed "that the condition of licence regarding Learning Plans should be eliminated ... "

Don Falle, general manager of Inukshuk Wireless, said that he was proud of the projects his company funded, but that Industry Canada, not Inukshuk, set the terms of the spectrum licence.

"We've done tremendous work. ... The fund has extended the Internet into unserved areas, particularly in the Far North," he said. "Those kind of things might continue, I don't know, but it's a licence condition, I want to emphasize that."

Mr. King and his fellow committee members didn't see it coming.

"That [e-mail] was the first time that I think any of us were aware that this change was about to happen," said Randy Bruce, a member of British Columbia's committee.

He said Learning Plan committee members did not know about the consultation process.

"Something seems fishy about this."

Wireless spectrum has become extremely valuable. Devices such as iPhones and Blackberries require networks that can handle more and more data, and the number of people carrying cellular phones increases each year.

The addition of new companies into the cell-phone market in Canada has also placed more demand on existing spectrum.

The Bell-Rogers co-operation began in 2005. Inukshuk was co-owned by Microcell Communications Inc. and Look Communications Inc. in 2000, when it won the licence to operate on the 2500 MHz band.

Industry Canada required the contribution to the Learning Plan to be the greater of \$50,000, 4 per cent of certain categories of revenue, or double the licensing fee.

A grant of \$147,000 helped the Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf build what it believes is the first on-line animated American Sign Language dictionary for children.

"Our primary audience was deaf children, who really don't have enough resources," said one of the society's co-directors, Anita Small.

Ms. Small said that without Inukshuk and the Learning Plan, the dictionary could never have been launched.

Mr. Bruce and the other members of B.C.'s learning committee have written to Minister of Industry Tony Clement.

"The commercial revenue potential of 4G network services is immense, and it is unacceptable that requiring a portion of revenues to financially support educational broadband use has been dropped," they wrote.

With research from Stephanie Chambers, Celia Donnelly and Grant Robertson

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