

New goal: Smart 21 to Top 7

Local News

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It's full speed ahead -- or more appropriately, high speed ahead -- for Stratford as it works diligently at trying to get its name on the short list of the world's most intelligent communities.

The city's high-speed wireless network and underlying fibre-optic grid -- and how the community is taking advantage of those digital resources -- are key factors in the drive for the coveted Intelligent Community Forum (ICF) designation.

And Stratford is partway there. In October, it joined an exclusive group of 21 communities from around the world recognized by the ICF for embracing the new broadband economy and using technology to build inclusiveness.

In a few weeks, the New York based think-tank will pare down its so-called Smart 21 list to the Top Seven before announcing the overall 2011 Intelligent Community of the Year in June.

Based on the city's recently submitted application for the next phase, Stratford has a legitimate shot at moving on, said Mayor Dan Mathieson.

"We are doing an incredible job in this community of advancing ourselves in the broadband economy and ICT (information and communication technologies) across a variety of sectors," he said. "It shows, for me, that this is a real bona fide opportunity for the city to reinvent in another part of the economy."

He's not alone in his optimism.

For the application (technically it's a questionnaire), a number of local businesses, industries and community organizations were consulted and asked to provide input on how they're using broadband. Support for the technology is far-reaching, from small-tech startups to the University of Waterloo Stratford Campus, Mathieson said.

"We wanted to show that this wasn't just a municipal initiative," he said.

It's that broad-based support in the community that will impress the ICF when it comes to selecting its Top Seven, said David Hicks, who has spent the last few weeks "buried" in material to be included in the city's application.

"I think we have a really strong case," said Hicks. "It's a compelling story."

Stratford may be the smallest city on the list (at 32,000 people, it's 1/1,000th the size of its largest competitor Chongqing, China) but it has some sizable support when it comes to the city's move toward an inclusive broadband economy, he said.

There is no shortage of outlets to express the support for Stratford's intelligent community bid. There's a Facebook page (Stratford Smart 21 Intelligent Community 2011), a Twitter site (@SmartStratford), a YouTube channel (StratfordSmart21) and a Meetup page (Intelligent Community Forum-Smart21 Finalists -Stratford) where residents can engage in the process.

Some digital heavyweights -- Open Text and the Canadian Digital Media Network (CDMN), to name a few -- are on board with the city's efforts, forwarding letters of support.

"I have experienced the many things that make Stratford a "smart" community -- its tremendous vision for the future, the infrastructure established to enable that vision and the community's dedication to bringing it all to life," says Open Text executive chairperson Tom Jenkins in his letter. "These are true testaments to an impressive community."

CDMN managing director Kevin Tuer, praises the city for its use of new technologies to adapt to changing economic times.

"The extensive fibre network throughout the core, combined with the initiative to flood the city in wireless coverage, positions Stratford to be a world leader in connecting industry with social and community services," writes Tuer.

On the city's website, there's flattering video message from CBC news anchor (and Stratford resident) Peter Mansbridge that touts the city's reinvention of itself as a digital centre, home to the University of Waterloo Stratford campus, the digital media think-tank known as the Stratford Institute, as well as the annual Canada 3.0 conference. "Stratford's proving to be a seedbed of digital innovation," said Mansbridge. "And now the city has a new laurel -- the right to call itself a Smart City."

On the application, a question about why innovation is important prompted this response from the city:

"With digital infrastructure in place, academia fast-forwarding plans for the university campus and think-tank, high profile events like Canada 3.0, advanced health-care services driven by digital innovation and workflow efficiencies, world-class business IT facilities and game-changing tech start-ups, the conditions are right for a perfect storm' of creativity and innovation. "

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