Over a crackly telephone connection, it is clear that Cambridge Bay is a world away from Ottawa.

"It's quite nice out there actually," says Darrell Ohokannoak, manager of Polarnet, a community service provider of broadband Internet for the Nunavut community and chairman of Nunavut Broadband Development Corp. (NBDC) when asked about the weather. "It's only about - 14, I think. The sun is out, but I think we're expecting a little bit of snow later on."

The hamlet of Cambridge Bay is located just north of the Arctic Circle on the south coast of Victoria Island, and is the largest community in the Kitikmeot Region of Nunavut with a population of around 1,350.

But it's not so different from Ottawa in terms of the population being tech savvy. A life-long resident of Cambridge Bay, Mr. Ohokannoak has been running Internet service in the region for about 10 years and started out with dial-up.

"A few businesses had accounts from the south in Yellowknife. They were racking up quite a few bills. The average person in an office here was racking up $800 per month in Internet bills. With the wireless we have now, it's about $60 per month," says Mr. Ohokannoak.

From Nunavut's biggest community, Iqaluit (population 7,500) to its smallest, Grise Fiord (population 200), all the villages are connected. With communities just outside of Ottawa still waiting for broadband, it seems almost impossible that it is being offered to these tiny northern hamlets, especially at such a reasonable price.

This feat was made possible with the tireless effort of Kanata resident David Smith, president of NBDC.

"Initially, I was hired by the government of Canada to set up communications and IT for the new government of Nunavut. I"
spent a couple years travelling between Yellowknife and
Nunavut. It was a great experience because it is probably one
of the few governments recently created in the western world.
It was great fun."

Mr. Smith continued working with the government as an
advisor, but it became evident that while government
departments were set up with IT, the rest of the economy had
nothing.

It may be hard to imagine the isolation of being in a northern,
fly-in only community without Internet access.

"All of these are fly-in communities with one boat a year to
bring in supplies," Mr. Smith said. "There are one or two
stores and no banks in most of them. To run a business or do
your banking or file your taxes, it's a necessity. If you have a
job and your employer wants your bank account number, out
of the 25 communities only three have banks. Typically it cost
$1,000 and more than a day of travel to get to a bank," Mr.
Smith said. And even if residents could afford it, many of the
older Nunavummiut don't speak English or have the two
pieces of identification required to open an account.

"Things were happening, like insurance companies would
say, 'We're not going to insure vehicles unless you send us a
digital photo of any damage claims.' It's amazing how many
times you need the Internet when you don't have it. To report
anything, to run a business, to look something up, you need
access."

In 2003, Mr. Smith started looking around to see how he
could bring the Internet at an affordable price to Nunavut. He
incorporated the NBDC, raised some money, picked a vendor
and now has an active network.

Uniting communities

Mr. Ohokannoak said he has seen how the access is
changing the community and bringing the vast region closer
together.

"Not everyone has a computer at home, so artists and other
business people will come to our office and ask us to place
their items on the Internet for them. I have seen some people
who have a polar bear or a musk ox hide for sale, place it on
a bulletin board and they were quite surprised when they
received a phone call at home from Yellowknife," he said.
Yellowknife is around 630 kilometres away. Just the Kitikmeot
Region alone covers over 446,727 square kilometres.

"This is different from the traditional way of writing that you
have a pelt or a carving or a snowmobile for sale on a piece
of paper and putting it up at the post office or the local store.
That was only for the local community. It's reaching the whole
region now," Mr. Ohokannoak said.

Mr. Smith said the primary obligation of the NBDC is to make
sure every Nunavut community has the same Internet service
at the same price point. "What often happens is that someone
will come in and put in cell phone service in the capital and
nowhere else. Our motto is if we can't do it in Grise Fiord,
we're not going to do it. To do that we have to raise funds to
level the playing field and make sure the services are priced
for everyone in Nunavut. We're not giving it away, but we're
trying to make sure that they get it," he said.

The success of the program has been overwhelming. The first
round of funding had a goal of 2,000 subscribers at the end of
nine years for the 8,600 households in Nunavut.
"We were more optimistic, but no one believed us at the time. We aren't at the two-year mark and we are over 3,000 subscribers. It beat every optimistic projection we had and then some," Mr. Smith said.

For now, Mr. Smith is in the process of surveying users and potential users to learn what they need over the next few years. Based on that information NBDC will be prepare a new business plan and will revisit investors for new funds to allow the growth to continue. NBDC is also involved with training community leaders in new technologies such as multi-point videoconferencing, digital voice services, hotspots for visitors and low-cost workstations.

"We are now in the good – or bad – situation of having to very quickly go back and say, OK, we surpassed out nine-year target in under two years, let's start thinking of what we do next," Mr. Smith said.