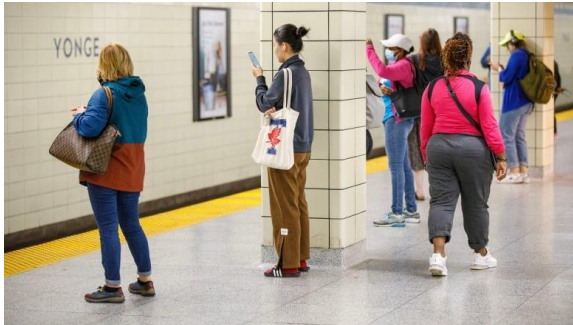




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Rogers expands TTC subway wireless network access to customers using other carriers

Users will be able to access network on all stops in downtown core



Commuters using various cellphone carriers will now be able to access internet service in the busiest parts of Toronto's subway system. (Alex Lupul/CBC)

By Sammy Hudes · The Canadian Press

Rogers Communications Inc. has announced that customers of all of the major Canadian wireless carriers and their flanker brands can now connect to its 5G wireless network in the busiest sections of the Toronto subway system.

The company said all subway riders can connect to its 5G network while in the Line 1 stations and tunnels in the so-called Downtown U from Union Station north to St. George and Bloor-Yonge, plus Spadina and Dupont stations. The area encompasses all of the subway stops in Toronto's downtown core.

Users are also able to access the network in 13 stations on Line 2, along Bloor Street from Keele to Castle Frank, plus the tunnels between St. George and Yonge stations.

Rogers acquired the cellular network in the subway system from BAI Canada earlier this year and has been working to upgrade it.

The service to all carriers comes after months of tense back-and-forth negotiations between Rogers and rivals Bell Canada and Telus Corp. over the best technical approach, as well as financial terms, for providing the coverage.

While that dispute remains unresolved, the federal government set a deadline of Tuesday for all TTC subway system passengers to have cellular connectivity, regardless of their carrier. It also set a Dec. 20 deadline for the companies to negotiate commercial agreements to provide service on the subway over the long term.

"Our dedicated team of technologists designed and introduced an immediate solution that added capacity, so Bell and Telus could join the network," said Rogers chief technology and information officer Ron McKenzie in a press release.

"For over 10 years, subway riders have been without mobile phone services and the Rogers team is pleased to step up and make 5G a reality for all riders today."



Late last week, both Bell and Telus said they were preparing to launch service for their customers on the TTC subway system. (Alex Lupul/CBC)

Bell spokeswoman Jacqueline Michelis called it a "great day" for the company's customers in Toronto, noting Bell network engineers had been working through the weekend to ramp up service.

"We would like to thank (Industry Minister Francois-Philippe Champagne) for his leadership in ensuring that all wireless carriers have the ability to serve their customers in Toronto's subway system, and that Rogers can no longer delay the deployment of wireless service for all TTC riders regardless of their choice of carrier," she said.

"Bell looks forward to working collaboratively with our partners to build out the remainder of the TTC's wireless network."

That was echoed by Telus spokesman Richard Gilhooley, stating "now, Telus customers can browse the Internet, talk and text, staying connected and safe on Toronto transit."

"We'll be working hard to expand the number of stations and tunnels covered in the coming months," he said.

Accessing the network

It's yet to be determined whether Bell and Telus will actually be able to participate in the build out of the subway's cellular network. Both want a joint build using a consortium model similar to that of Montreal's Metro system, rather than a pay-for-access approach. Rogers has not publicly committed to either model.

Late last week, both companies said they were preparing to launch service for their customers on the TTC subway in time to meet the Tuesday deadline set by the federal government. They had also sent text messages to customers informing them they'd soon be able to access the TTC subway system's wireless network.

Monday's news was welcomed by Shelagh Pizey-Allen, executive director of the TTCriders advocacy group, who said it still took too long to reach the milestone given the ongoing safety issues on the transit system.

"It's still kind of shocking how long it's taken to get to this point, but we're glad that the federal government stepped in, that the new mayor asked the federal government to step in, and that everyone will have access to cell service in the subway," she said.

"People report that the subway is the place where they feel the least safe on the TTC network and it's because people feel isolated."



Canada's industry minister, Francois-Philippe Champagne, had vowed to step in on the issue if needed. (Justin Tang/The Canadian Press)

Rogers bought the Canadian arm of BAI Communications, which had owned the rights to provide wireless service on the subway, in April. It then announced plans to upgrade the existing infrastructure installed by BAI at most downtown subway stations and build 5G capability for the entire network of stations and tunnels — a process it expects to take two years.

Federal government involvement

Rogers vowed to make the system accessible for other carriers to provide coverage to their customers. That includes honouring BAI's previous contract with Freedom Mobile, now owned by Quebecor Inc., the lone carrier whose customers already had access to the network.

Rogers customers have had cellular service on the subway since the company activated high-speed 5G wireless service on Aug. 23. The move came while Champagne was considering changes to the conditions of licence for the major telecoms in order to ensure all TTC customers could access Rogers' upgraded cellular network.

Bell and Telus had urged the federal minister to prevent Rogers from giving its own customers a head start on using the network to make phone calls, send texts and browse the web.

But after launching service before Champagne ruled on the issue, Rogers then argued in a submission to Ottawa that the federal government should not force it to turn off access for its own customers — a position accepted by Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada.

"As ISED's objective is to ensure access to wireless services for Canadians throughout the TTC Subway System, it would be contrary to ISED's objectives to prevent or remove services once they have been offered," it said in its ruling last month.

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