

## Get ready for the small-town boom

*The same demographic forces that have eviscerated small communities and rural areas in Eastern Ontario could be their salvation*

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By David K. Foot

Young people move. They always have and always will. This is how they seek adventure and build experience. Besides jobs, they tend to seek activity and night life.

These are the attributes of large cities. Not surprisingly, therefore, large cities tend to be demographically younger and more active than smaller cities, towns and rural areas.

The loss of young talent from smaller communities has been the lament of mayors and other community leaders for at least the past 50 years. The first Boomer, born in 1947, reached age 18 in 1965 so over the 1960s and 1970s the Boomers left small town and rural Canada and headed into the major urban centres. The downtown cores of Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver grew substantially over this period, thereby intensifying the urbanization of Canada.



*King Street in downtown Brockville. Smaller communities suffered a rapid depopulation when young Boomers fled for urban centres. But some will benefit as retiring Boomers seek the slower-paced life.*

*Photo credit Wayne Cuddington, Ottawa Citizen.*

However, population aging has predictable impacts. As people age from their twenties into their thirties, they start their families. They like a back yard for their kids and pets. This is not a downtown attribute. It can be found in the suburbs.

The first Boomer reached age 30 in 1977, so over the 1980s and 1990s the Boomers largely exited the downtown cores and moved out to the suburbs to raise their families. The city centres stopped growing and massive suburbanization took over. The growth of the north and south shores of Montreal, the 905 region around Toronto, the lower mainland of British Columbia, the Calgary-Edmonton corridor and many regional cities had a lot to do with these inevitable demographic realities.

Statistics Canada understands this reality. Urban areas are defined to include both the downtown cores and their surrounding suburbs. By this definition, Canada has become more urbanized over the past half century as a larger and larger share of the population make their homes in both the cities and the suburbs. As a result, large metropolitan areas have become the magnets and drivers of our economy, which is why so many pundits argue for special deals for cities.

However, the mirror image of these trends has been not only the decreasing importance of smaller communities, but also their rapid population aging and rising economic dependency on large urban areas. The exodus of younger workers leaves non-metropolitan Canada with larger shares of its population in both the youth ages and in the senior ages, and a smaller share in

the working ages. The 2006 Census revealed that approximately two out of three Canadians live in large metropolitan areas of more than 100,000 persons. Their populations comprise 24 per cent under age 20 and 13 per cent aged 65 and over. The populations of the remaining one-third of the country include 25 per cent under age 20 and 15.5 per cent aged 65 and over.

While large metropolitan cities face the challenges associated with the working-age population - housing, welfare, unemployment, crime and a host of other social challenges, particularly for the underprivileged -- smaller communities are quietly facing different challenges. Not only are they confronted with the possible devastating impacts of mill and manufacturing closures, often removing the only major employer in town, they are responsible for the Canadian youth that feed the workforce growth of cities and increasingly for the health and welfare of seniors.

And all this with a smaller working age population resulting in a depleted tax base. This is a responsibility that has many smaller city, town and rural mayors and councils reeling.

How can they possibly meet this challenge? Is there any hope is on the horizon? Those aging Boomers may come to the rescue.

With retirement looming over the next two decades, many Boomers will be seeking a slower paced life. While they appreciate the culinary and cultural treats of Canada's large urban areas, many will increasingly prefer peace and quiet rather than noise and action. Their hearing is waning (although few will admit it) and they struggle with conversations in noisy restaurants. Their eyesight is waning (a reality most will now acknowledge) so driving "in the fast lane" is becoming increasingly problematic. For many, transit is not readily available when and where they need it and they are less likely to ride bikes. Parking is problematic. Their love-hate relationship with large cities is building.

Smaller communities can offer a viable alternative for the Boomers' retirement. Of course, some Boomers can afford the best of both worlds, by owning both a city house or condo and a "vacation" property in a smaller community where they increasingly spend their time. For many, two houses are not an option. Moving to a smaller community can provide them with an opportunity to cash in their city house and possibly add to their ever-challenged nest egg for retirement. It may also provide an opportunity for revival of smaller cities, towns and rural areas.

Elliot Lake in Ontario and Kelowna in British Columbia have shown that this is possible. Will Brockville and Cornwall and a whole host of other smaller communities with picturesque topographies, lakes, rivers, walking trails, fresh air, nice golf courses, good local live theatre, nearby fishing and hunting and increasingly upscale restaurants offering fresh local food, follow?

This can be the window of opportunity for smaller communities that does not depend on the vicissitudes of tourism with exchange rate variations and global events that are beyond the community's control. Not all will succeed. But demographic information can provide communities with a key to possible success. By examining the spending and activity patterns of seniors, communities can develop facilities and services that will be attractive to this growing demographic.

Besides natural attributes, it requires a commitment from all community leaders. Transit must be redesigned. Walking trails are essential. City gardens are a good idea and leaders must work with the remaining youth to create jobs and prevent crime. It doesn't need a local council focused on hockey arenas -- curling arenas maybe.

Teamwork may be crucial to success. Some large regional cities may be able to provide many of these facilities and services in one location, but many other smaller cities and towns will need to co-operate and form regional clusters. One community may offer excellent live theatre and classical music while another nearby community focuses on curling. House and garden tours can be co-ordinated within the regional rather than just the local catchment area and jointly advertised to attract visitors.

Purchases of local food by stores and restaurants need to be encouraged. New business opportunities such as boutique stores, spas, bed and breakfasts and, perhaps, small hotels in heritage buildings may emerge as the new retired residents seek local indulgences and attract Boomer friends and relatives as visitors. Golf courses and fishing clubs must get together to provide both residents and visitors with multiple offerings, thereby encouraging the visitors to stay longer.

In short, local economic development and tourism offices need to co-operate, not compete, with nearby communities and regional cities.

A key to this possible resurgence of smaller communities is access to health care. Today a Canadian reaching age 65 can anticipate over 20 years of semi-retirement and retirement living. Much of this time will be in relatively good health. They may work part-time and some will volunteer in the new communities. But while the average early Boomer is still 20 years away from making major demands on the health-care system, they want to know it is there if they need it. This raises many issues with respect to the geographical delivery of quality health care, both now and into the future.

Despite recent events in financial markets, the upcoming generation of Boomer retirees will be considerably more healthy and wealthy than previous generations of retirees. With increasing life expectancy and better health they will distinguish themselves from the older generations of seniors in the community. Making sure that these senior-seniors are well provided for is likely to be an important priority. The retired Boomers may become the new wave of volunteers to this older group, as well as to their own parents, because they know that within 20 years they will be needing those services themselves.

If our smaller cities, towns and rural areas are going to take on the challenge of providing healthy and fulfilling lives to an aging population with a rapidly growing active young seniors group, they will need to create an inventory of existing community attributes and a plan to develop appropriate facilities and services for the retiring Boomers.

This can then provide a roadmap for an optimistic future for smaller communities in Canada.

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David K. Foot is a professor of economics at the University of Toronto, and co-author of the *Boom, Bust & Echo* books.