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More people are moving to Calgary area than anywhere else on Prairies

The Calgary metropolitan area's population — which includes the City of Calgary and smaller communities such as Airdrie, Chestermere and Cochrane — crossed 1.6 million people in 2022

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New homes in the Carrington development on the northern edge of Calgary. Gavin Young/Postmedia

Calgary and its surrounding communities rank as the fastest-growing area in the Prairies, according to newly released Statistics Canada data.

The agency said the Calgary metropolitan area grew by 3.1 per cent between July 1, 2021, and July 1, 2022, the 13th-highest such rate across Canada.

The region, which encompasses the City of Calgary as well as some bedroom communities, including Airdrie, Chestermere and Cochrane, now has an estimated population of 1,608,342, up from 1,558,588 the previous year.

The growth is much-needed as the city continues to contend with a labour shortage, said Calgary Chamber of Commerce president and CEO Deborah Yedlin. That group found in a fall report 31.5 per cent of city businesses are concerned about gaps in workers.

“Obviously, people are seeing Calgary as a city of economic opportunity, that they can find employment that’s meaningful and that they can afford to live here,” Yedlin said.

“It’s great news for Calgary, great news for companies and great news for the labour situation, so hopefully it continues.”

The Calgary Metropolitan Region Board celebrated the growth, saying the gains are a testament to a high quality of life in and around the city.

That board is responsible for supporting the long-term sustainability of the region, which includes developing and implementing a growth plan.

Its current plan forecasts the Calgary region will have 2.46 million residents by 2048, with the city itself passing the two-million mark.

Board chair Greg Clark said a lot of consideration goes into supporting that kind of expansion.

“We’re trying to grow more sustainably, focus our growth in ways that will save taxpayer dollars and have a lower environmental footprint, lower water use, less agricultural land used up, and have thoughtful planning around things like transit, recreation, police,” said Clark.

“Regional planning is a long-term process, but we’ve already seen some really positive results.”

BILD Calgary, an industry group representing local land developers, said strong growth out of the COVID-19 pandemic is welcomed but does come with some challenges in maintaining sufficient housing stock.

“When COVID hit, all expectations at that time was that it would continue to be slow, but it didn’t. It was pretty much the opposite,” said BILD CEO Brian Hahn.

“Calgary remains one of the most affordable metropolitan regions in Canada to buy a home ... That’s driving, certainly, some of the growth from outside of Alberta to our community.”

In its report, Statistics Canada said the country’s large urban areas saw a population rebound in the past year, with many experiencing their highest growth rates in two decades. Canada as a whole grew by 2.1 per cent during the period, a 573,604-person increase as the country’s population now crests 39 million.

It's a trend largely driven by immigration, with Canada's population growing by 657,833 from international migration alone, the greatest such increase since 1971–72 — growth that corresponds to fewer COVID-19 restrictions, increased immigration targets from Ottawa and the acceptance of people fleeing Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The Calgary region welcomed 25,622 immigrants in 2021–22.

“Net international migration to Canada was up substantially, even when compared to the pre-pandemic period,” Statistics Canada said.

All regions of Alberta saw net population gains from interprovincial migration.

Banff was Canada's second-fastest growing urban area, with a 7.5 per cent increase. Didsbury and St. Paul had among Canada's highest rates of population decrease, at 2.5 per cent each.

Growth was highest in Atlantic Canada, with the Moncton and Halifax areas topping the list with 5.4 per cent and 4.5 per cent population growth, respectively.

Alberta had the five fastest-growing regions in the Prairies, with Canmore, Sylvan Lake, Edmonton and Lethbridge joining Calgary on that list. Outside of Alberta, Saskatoon — the 33rd-fastest-growing region in Canada — ranks highest in the Prairies.

Of Canada's 12 regions that saw population decline in the last year, four were in Saskatchewan. That includes Estevan, whose 1.1 per cent population drop was the second-highest decrease in the country.