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Rural communities near Calgary could see influx of residents in coming years, says study author

City dwellers moving to rural communities can be valuable to those small towns, says Kevin McQuillan, the author of a new U of C study called Leaving the Big City: New Patterns of Migration in Canada

Stephen Tipper || May 5, 2024



Sunrise east of Nanton, Ab., on Wednesday, March 16, 2022. Mike Drew/Postmedia

Richard and Wendy Davies loved living in Calgary, their home of 17 years.

But with Richard, who was in IT, retiring, they wanted to move to a place with a slower pace of life but still within an hour's drive of the city. In Calgary, they had taken advantage of the many things Calgary has to offer — including the occasional Flames

game, concerts and pub nights with friends, and a daughter, son-in-law and two grandkids who live in the city.

The couple, both in their mid-60s, settled on a house in Nanton, a 90-kilometre drive south of Calgary along Highway 2. They moved to the small town of roughly 2,000 residents last October.

It's a simpler, unhurried life in Nanton, with no battling for parking spots and waiting in lines, says Richard.

While it wasn't like the southwest Calgary neighbourhood of Braeside was busy, driving in Calgary can be hectic, says Wendy.

"As soon as you drove out of the neighbourhood or drove back from Fish Creek or anything, all of a sudden you're in traffic," she says. "It was kind of like, 'Oh my gosh I really want to live somewhere where I don't have that.'"

But in Nanton there are no traffic lights, adds Richard, admittedly an impatient driver.

Noise was a bit of an issue in Calgary — they lived close to a fire station and constantly heard sirens — and the city had gradually become more crowded over the 17 years, say the Davies, who had moved to Alberta from Montreal in 1991 and had raised their three kids in Cochrane in the 1990s through the mid-2000s when it was a much smaller town.



Richard and Wendy Davies moved to Nanton from Calgary in October. Stephen Tipper/Postmedia

“We noticed that a lot after COVID,” says Richard of Calgary becoming more crowded. “A lot of the parks we used to go and walk our dog became overwhelmed.”

The couple are looking forward to spending this spring, summer and fall getting to better know their new hometown, shopping at local stores, eating at local restaurants, checking out various events in town and getting to know more people in the community.

By moving to Nanton, they say they got more “bang for our buck” by moving from their Calgary four-level split to their Nanton bungalow.

“The house is sort of in the same category, but it was a fair bit cheaper just because it was in Nanton versus Calgary,” says Richard, adding a separate building in the back that he’s using as a shop was a big selling factor for him.

‘A positive for smaller communities’

City dwellers moving to rural communities can be valuable to those small towns, says Kevin McQuillan, the author of a new University of Calgary study called *Leaving the Big City: New Patterns of Migration in Canada*.

“On the whole it’s a positive for the smaller communities because we know many of them are starting to experience issues of decline, shrinking populations and people older, and so on,” he says.

People who’ve sold their house in Calgary and have money in the bank after moving to a rural community become valuable taxpayers to their new community, says McQuillan.

“An influx of new citizens gives the possibility of people who will be engaged in the community, whether it’s running for office or helping out with various non-profit agencies,” he says.

Nanton and other communities near Calgary could see an influx of residents in the coming years if housing costs remain high, says McQuillan.

Canada’s biggest cities of Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver have seen significant population losses to smaller communities within their respective provinces, due to recent employment trends such as work-from-home and hybrid work as well as rising housing costs in big cities, according to the study.

But in Calgary and Edmonton, the number of residents leaving the city for other places in the province balances out with those coming to the city from other Alberta communities, says McQuillan.

More Calgarians could move to smaller communities within commuting distance: author

McQuillan says he wouldn't be surprised to see more Calgarians decide to move out of the city in the coming years to communities out of the metropolitan area, but still within commuting distance, if housing costs continue to climb. The Calgary metropolitan area includes Airdrie, Cochrane and Chestermere.

“If you only have to go into work one or two days a week, being 75 or 80 kilometres away from your workplace isn't the end of the world,” he says. “If you had to do it five days a week, it would be quite a challenge, but if you're only doing it one or two days a week, maybe it's not such a big challenge.”



Signs for the City of Chestermere are shown on Highway 1 east of Calgary on Sunday, June 19, 2022. Jim Wells/Postmedia

In part due to the pandemic, many people have become used to working from home and hybrid situations are more common, opening up more living options.

“Both the housing issues and the work issues are really going to be critical in the decisions people make about where they want to go,” says McQuillan.

Housing prices are a significant factor in deciding where people choose to live, he says.

“For younger people, they’re looking for cheaper accommodation by maybe going farther away from the cities,” says McQuillan, adding that in the Toronto case, older residents are cashing in on valuable real estate.

Smaller communities more affordable: realtors

Nanton realtor Allison IsBell says the trend of Calgarians moving to smaller communities like Nanton comes down to affordability.

“As much as (pricing) has increased, it’s still very much cheaper than Okotoks and High River and Calgary,” she says. “You can get a much bigger, better home here if you’re willing to do the commute. Or we attract retirees, or young families.”

In Nanton, IsBell and another local realtor, Jennifer Handley, say the housing market has been unprecedented, with few houses on the market at any given time and buyers quickly snapping up houses — sometimes above the asking price — after they’re put up for sale. While in years past Nanton would typically have 25 to 30 houses on the market, now it’s usually just a handful.



Downtown High River was photographed on Wednesday, June 7, 2023. Gavin Young/Postmedia

The situation is much the same in High River, which was among the other communities that the Davies considered. Prices are significantly less in the town of 14,000 than in Calgary, which is the largest source of buyers of High River homes other than local residents moving within town, says realtor Jim Ross.

“The average (single family) price here is \$200,000 less than the average single home price in Calgary,” says Ross.

Ross also attributes High River’s attractiveness in part to what he called the excellent health care available in town, including a hospital with a 24/7 emergency department, maternity ward and cancer centre. That appeals to both seniors and families, he says.

“High River is a very safe, comfortable, attractive small town to live in,” says Ross. He adds the town’s abundance of green space, school system and daycare capacity are also selling points, as is the short drive of less than 25 minutes to Calgary’s south end.