

CBC News – December 13, 2024

Hang on, Acme! Calgary's population boom expected to spill over to small-town Alberta next

As Calgary prices creep up, economists expect to see more intraprovincial migration

Karina Zapata & Elise Stolte || December 13, 2024



Linda Stephens, centre, with her staff at an outdoor grill event for the Beiseker Lions Country Fair. She recently moved to the village of Acme from Ontario. (Submitted by Linda Stephens)

Acme, Alta. Population 640 — plus three.

As Calgary's real estate prices edge upward, life in small town Alberta is looking increasingly tempting for the thousands of Ontario residents heading west. Linda Stephens is one of them.

She moved to Acme from Barrie, Ont., with her husband and son last year and is loving it.

Calgary was too expensive. So she found a house here with three times the space she could get in Barrie. Now she's rebuilding her real estate business and runs the rink concession stand in nearby Beiseker.

She's amused by the twists and turns of life that landed her here.

"It was never even on my radar," said Stephens.

"Now we're in our third [hockey] season and providing local jobs and giving back to the community and interacting with all of the families and the kids. It's wonderful."

Alberta's population took off post-pandemic, when the Bank of Canada started raising interest rates and housing became even more expensive in other major Canadian cities.



Acme is a small village about 60 kilometres northeast of Calgary with a population of 640. (Submitted by Linda Stephens)

Interprovincial to intraprovincial migration

The first wave of migration into Alberta was concentrated in Calgary, likely because many people were international migrants, sometimes coming here via Toronto, and immigrants tend to go to large cities with names they recognize, says ATB economist Mark Parsons.

But he and other economists have been predicting this growth will spill across the province as prices in Calgary creep up.

Planners won't get the nuanced data from Statistics Canada until May, but Parsons said he's watching real estate data for any hints.

At one point last May, Calgary's average house price was \$190,000 more than Edmonton's.

"We just thought it was a matter of time before people would start looking elsewhere," said Parsons.

"And over the last year you've seen Edmonton's housing market pick up. That's one of the first clues. But we're not only seeing it in Edmonton, we're seeing it in other markets as well.

"In places like Red Deer and Lethbridge, you've seen significant housing price gains."

Already, smaller centres are starting to feel the pressure that comes with rapid growth. In many towns, rentals are hard to come by. Sewer and water infrastructure needs upgrading in Airdrie. Homelessness is a growing problem in cities such as Red Deer.



At Calgary Economic Development's 2025 economic outlook event in October, ATB Financial's vice-president and chief economist Mark Parsons told the audience he expects to see growth spill over into small-town Alberta. (YouTube)

In October, the Alberta government launched an infrastructure grant with \$20 million a year for the next three years to help municipalities address those pressures they're facing.

But Alberta Municipalities, a group that represents the province's towns and cities, said it's only a start. Growth pressures and the cost of aging infrastructure will require much, much more.

Better schools, more inclusive than expected

So what is it like for people who are landing in a place where they never expected to be?

For Stephens, the transition was lonelier than she expected it to be, but she said it was worth it. There are tons of opportunities in Acme and it was easy to make friends over time, especially in the hockey community, she said.

Ninety minutes southeast of Acme, Courtney MacLean found herself in Bassano. That's a town with a population of 1,304 that grew by almost four per cent last year.



Courtney MacLean's three children outside the seniors lodge in Bassano, Alta., trick-or-treating there this year for the first time. (Submitted by Courtney MacLean)

Her mother-in-law lives there, and it was a soft place to land and regroup after her family was priced out of Airdrie.

But it's been way better than she imagined. She has three neurodivergent children and they were struggling in the large, busy classrooms of their Airdrie school.

Her Grade 6 daughter was in a class of 56 students and two teachers. She has anxiety disorder and she was terrified to walk into the class or raise her hand. But now in Bassano, she's in a class of 20.

MacLean asked to meet another child's teacher to create a support plan. Back in Airdrie, she had a quick meeting just to hear her concerns. In Bassano, staff had time for four people to all sit down with her and come up with a plan together.

"This has been a really positive experience," she said. "We weren't sure if we wanted to settle here long-term. You know, it is small, and having to drive in the winter half an hour minimum to get to a bigger store is definitely a bit of a challenge.

"But it forces you to go, 'I can't get a baguette? Well, maybe I'll learn how to make it myself.'"

Oka Carew has also been thrilled with Bassano. Her husband got a job there as a foreign-trained doctor — he had to work in a rural area as a condition of practising medicine in Alberta.

But it took Carew seven months to decide to leave Edmonton and join him after he told her they would be the only Black family in town.



Oka Carew and her two kids at the Bassano Stampede. (Submitted by Oka Carew)

She was worried about her daughter getting bullied in school because she knew rural Canadian communities only through stereotypes. But within two weeks of being in school, her daughter was getting invited to birthday parties.

"No incidents — nothing. Everybody welcomed us. They're giving us pies and inviting us out to dinner.... I didn't have anything to worry about, to be honest," said Carew.

And, unlike in Edmonton, it was easy to sign her daughter up for swimming lessons. Everything is nearby. She doesn't have to worry about traffic.

The peace and quiet reminds her of the small town she lived in while in Nigeria.

"I really, really really, love the place. I'm thinking we're going to be here for a while."

Alberta's 'horseshoe' communities

Back in Acme, Stephens says she's noticing more of her real estate clients are looking at moving to what she calls the "horseshoe communities" north of Airdrie — from Olds, to Irricana, to Three Hills.

"I service all of these communities and affordability is a factor. Jobs are a factor," said Stephens, pointing to the expanding lithium facility near Olds.

According to Realtor.ca, single detached homes in those communities sell for around \$350,000 to \$650,000. That's compared to Calgary's median price of \$690,000, according to the Calgary Real Estate Board.

She likes to take clients for lunch and give them tours of communities they want to buy in so they can fully understand what it's like to live there.

Lately, she's been warning people prices are projected to grow six to seven per cent across Alberta in the new year, as lower interest rates increase demand in the housing market.

"We're predicting a return to bid wars.... So if you get in ahead of the curve, you've got a better opportunity than if you wait until your typical May and June."

Looking long-term, Alberta's Treasury Board and Finance Ministry predicts steady population growth of between one and two per cent, specifically in the QEII corridor and the areas around Lethbridge.

But in the short term, there are still questions around how the federal government's reduced immigration targets will impact the total numbers of people moving to Alberta. That's what Alberta Central's chief economist Charles St-Arnaud is watching.

"Could it help in some ways to reduce all the affordability pressures we're seeing in Toronto and Vancouver, for example? Could we start to see rents declining in those areas and, in some ways, remove some of the incentive to move to Alberta?" he said on an *Alberta At Noon* call-in show about moving to Alberta.

But both he and ATB's Parsons expect growth to continue, with even more change to come in small-town Alberta.