



Krista Del Gatto, executive officer of the Windsor-Essex County Board of Realtors stands on the banks of the Detroit River in Windsor, Ontario.

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DEMOGRAPHICS

Smaller cities buttering up baby boomers

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Ontario's Windsor-Essex County has hit upon a formula for reinventing itself.

Last week, ground was broken for the \$1.4-billion Windsor-Essex Parkway, which will link Windsor with a planned second bridge to the United States. The town of Tecumseh's waterfront park is getting a facelift, with the province pledging \$4-million toward the project, and the town of Lakeshore has a \$50-million arena complex under proposal. And in the past three years, more than \$110-million in residential real estate was sold here.

That's a lot of action for a community devastated by the loss of thousands of manufacturing jobs less than a decade ago. The revitalization is due in part to business leaders who came together in 2008 with a plan to create economic prosperity and spur commercial and residential development.

Their strategy? To rebrand Windsor-Essex as a destination for Canada's retiring baby boomers.

"We wanted to create new jobs and investment," said Krista Del Gatto, executive officer of the Windsor-Essex County Real Estate Board. "We could do that by attracting the affluent, active retiree, the semi-retiree and age-50-plus families planning for a comfortable, secure retirement."

In 2008, facing growing unemployment and a depressed local economy, the real estate board, the local home builders association and the Windsor-Essex Regional Chamber of Commerce banded to aggressively market the region to retirees across Canada.

"We knew the retiring boomers were going to become an incredible opportunity for any community that could see them fitting into their community development plan," said Linda Smith, the chamber of commerce's president. "Our real estate prices are 30 to 50 per cent lower [than Vancouver, Montreal, Calgary and Toronto]."

"It's Ontario's warmest climate, we're surrounded by water, and there's quick access to the American marketplace," she said.

At the centre of the campaign is the coalition's website, Retirehere.ca, is supplemented by outreach programs that bring prospective buyers to sample the local hotels, wineries, restaurants and casino.

The coalition is considering its campaign an early success. In the past three years, 422 "50-plus" households have moved to the area. Also, Ms. Smith says, \$90-million in new luxury development has been brought to the region because of the program's success, including a new Amica Mature Lifestyles condo development.

Canadian cities are doing what a number of U.S. cities have done, says John Geha, president of Coldwell Banker's Canadian operations. "Pittsburgh really redeveloped itself from the steel industry. Dallas, Texas, really diversified itself," he said.

Retiring boomers are craving a move to smaller cities and towns, says David Foot, a demographer and author of *Boom, Bust & Echo*. The first wave of boomers are selling their family homes in the big cities and relocating for their retirement.

Canadian communities that were hit hard by the loss of manufacturing jobs can benefit from the increased tax base and spending potential of the retiring boomers, says Mr. Foot. He points to Elliot Lake, Ont., as a successful example of a town that rebranded itself as a

retirement community after the devastating collapse of its mining industry in the early '90s.

And what are boomers looking for? Access to water and access to health care, says Mr. Foot.

“[Cities and towns] that have the right elements, that can generate peace and quiet, good health-care facilities and proximity to water, should be thinking about it,” he says.

Other municipalities are standing on the sidelines for now, says Scott Brown, senior vice-president of Colliers International’s residential marketing and sales services for Western Canada.

The recession has slowed things down, he says. “Many people's erosion of wealth has seen them saying, ‘Freedom 55 has become Freedom 65, or Freedom 75.’ ”

Mr. Brown anticipates that cities on Canada's west coast, including Squamish, Abbotsford and Langley, B.C., will ultimately benefit from retirees downsizing from their big-city family homes.

Other communities will have to “get more aggressive” to attract boomers, he says, citing the Okanagan towns of Peachland, Kelowna and possibly Vernon.

“I think there will be an interesting play in the cities where people are going to get out of their single-family home and live in multi-family buildings, where they have access to shops, culture, restaurants and education. And their counter-existence will be a single-family home on a lake or golf course,” Mr. Brown says.

Windsor-Essex business leaders say their plan is working. Ms. Smith of the Chamber of Commerce says that they are hoping to expand their marketing program to attract people from Alberta and British Columbia. She notes that 28 per cent of their new 50-plus residents have come from the West.

“We are on a five-year plan. We're only three years in, and we're still expanding,” she said. “But it's working, and we're still celebrating that.”

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