



Rural Renewal: Attracting Millennials to Rural Places

Background: The Challenge of Rural Renewal

Clearly many rural communities face a common challenge: how to reverse the flow of young people out of their home towns and regions to major urban centres, leaving behind an aging population, reduced tax roles, struggling schools, failing businesses, and flagging spirits. A study focusing on population trends in the Okanagan-Similkameen Regional District published by SIBAC, with the support of the Real Estate Foundation of British Columbia, starkly underscores the challenge.

Local Health Area	% Total 2015 Population Over 70	% Total 2030 Projected Population Over 70	% Total 2040 Projected Population Over 70	Projected # of Individuals Over 70 in 2040
(BC Average)	11.7%	17.6%	19.5%	1,182,234
Penticton	19.9%	25.4%	25.7%	13,445
Keremeos	23.2%	33.5%	34.7%	2,134
Summerland	20.7%	30.8%	31.8%	4,096
Southern Okanagan	26%	37.1%	36.5%	6,896
Princeton	22.3%	38.7%	38%	1,440

Context

Perhaps ironically, the problem may be a significant part of the solution when it comes to the “brain drain” – or “youth drain” (Generation Y and Z or “Millennials, born between 1981 and 2001) – from rural communities and regions to major cities. Simply put, as sprawling urban areas such as BC’s Lower Mainland and Capital regions continue to grow, they become increasingly less livable for many, including young working families unable or unwilling to cope with astronomical housing costs, massive traffic jams, rising crime rates, and increasing stress levels. This serves to make rural towns are areas, with their far more affordable housing, slower pace, ready access to nature, and strong social networks look ever more appealing to fed-up urban Millennials.

In some areas, this alone has led to a welcome influx of young newcomers. However in many cases, rural communities can’t afford to simply sit back and “wait for them to come.”

What Do Newcomers Want?

There appear to be two categories of rural newcomers and potential newcomers. The first group migrate to rural places of their own accord — these are largely former city-dwellers who have made the decision to move, by and large of their own accord. Let's call them *The Decided*.

The Decided

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and the University of Minnesota Department of Extension have both done research on what motivates these newcomers to make the rural move. In a 2010 study conducted by the University of Minnesota across seven communities in rural west-central Minnesota, new residents reported the following reasons for their move:

- To find a less congested place to live (77%)
- A better environment for raising children (75%)
- To find better quality local schools (69%)
- To find a safer place to live (69%)
- To lower the cost of housing (66%)
- To find a simpler pace of life (66%)
- To find more outdoor recreational activities (63%)
- To be closer to relatives (62%)
- To live in a desirable natural environment (60%)
- To lower the cost of living (53%)

When asked what sources of information they used when making the decision to move, respondents listed family, friends & acquaintances, and current community residents. Additionally, many also turned to the internet, although finding information of specific interest to them online often proved difficult.

Few of these folks brought work with them. Very few of them found jobs in fields they had previous experience or training in. It appears that in many cases, they were anxious enough to leave the city, they were willing to risk under- or even unemployment in their new rural homes.

Then there are *The Undecided*.

The Undecided

These are the potential difference-makers for many rural communities facing stagnating, or even decreasing numbers of working-age residents — relatively young, well educated city dwellers who are less than satisfied with their current situation. The most interesting cadre is composed of Millennials, especially those that have started families, with skills that allow them to bring their work with them, and incomes sufficient to allow them to readily find accommodation when they move in to a rural area.

The challenge is how to attract them. While they, too, may be tiring of the costs and stresses of big city life, they haven't moved yet. Attracting these people will require more than a "sit back and wait for it to happen" approach. They will need to be persuaded to come. To devise a strategy that has a chance of doing so requires an understanding of what they are looking for.

“Every 30+ year-old living on the coasts is actively asking themselves why they still live there!

“If they are a Creative, there is zero reason to live in a large city, as you are unable to pioneer.

“Take out billboards with cost of living and average commute time!”

— Zachary Mannheimer

“We Still Haven’t Found What We’re Looking For”

Mannheimer is one of the leading thinkers on what makes Millennials consider leaving the city for a smaller place. Founder of Iowa’s Des Moines Social Club, VP of Creative Placemaking for Iowa Business Growth, he has led numerous revitalization efforts in rural communities in the American Midwest. Mannheimer, who is particularly focused on attracting and retaining young people to rural communities, underscores the first challenge for every rural place is answering the simple question, *what makes us unique?*

Young people make decisions based on perception and values, he argues, citing Atlanta mayor Kasim Reed, who once stated, *“If a city is not seen as cool, then it is not going to progress in the future.”* Millennials will choose to live in a place where they earn less money, if they deem that place more attractive than a “more boring” town with higher paying jobs. Mannheimer argues any rural community hoping to attract these newcomers must think in terms of combining

culture with entrepreneurialism. He’s developed a list of 13 things most young people are looking for in the places they choose to live, including:

- an active cultural scene
- fibre optics
- entrepreneurial culture
- restaurants & bars
- breweries & distilleries
- co-working spaces
- public spaces
- innovative housing
- retailers
- great schools
- lively downtown core
- local public markets
- good jobs

Proximity to mountains, oceans, and lakes are bonuses when it comes to shaping a compelling case for prospective young in-migrants.

Culture as a Population Attractant

An increasing number of rural communities across North America have come to realize the potential importance of “an active cultural scene” in enticing Millennials to take up residency. Rosebud, Alberta, through its renowned theatre and the Rosebud School of the Arts, Sechelt, BC and its Sunshine Coast Festival of the Written Arts, Kaslo, BC and the Kaslo Jazz Festival, Burlington, Newfoundland and The Gathering, and Lanesboro, Minnesota and Lanesboro Arts are all examples of small, rural towns that have effectively used culture as a population attractant.

Oil City, Pennsylvania

Oil City, Pennsylvania (pop. 10,500) started a successful artist relocation program that offers artists fixed-rate financing, grants, and loans for purchasing and rehabbing downtown properties. Since 2006, the program (based on a similar initiative launched by the town of Paducah, Kentucky, in 2000) has attracted 28 artists, 21 of whom have bought homes in Oil City, and injected an estimated \$1.3 million into the local economy. Artist Relocation Coordinator Joann Wheeler notes that newly resident artists have also created gathering places, such as Art on Elm where artists and non-artist residents alike make and experience art.

“They come here and stick,” she said. “They don’t just buy a house and flip it and move away. Several businesses on Seneca Street started as artist-owned businesses.”

— **Joann Wheeler**

Fergus Falls, Minnesota

The Kaddatz Hotel opens in Fergus Falls, Minnesota (pop. 13,000) in 1914, closed in the 1970s, and sat empty until 2004 when Artspace converted it into 10 units of artist lofts. Eric Santwire was the second artist to move into the Kaddatz Artist Lofts. Priced out of his Minneapolis neighbourhood, and having difficulty connecting with the artist community there, he decided to move to Fergus Falls specifically because of the Lofts. The Kaddatz Galleries occupies the building’s first floor, which means resident artists can both live and show their work in the same building. *“The Kaddatz Galleries feels like more than a gallery. It’s a place where people go to strike up conversation,”* says Michele Anderson, Rural Program Director for Springboard for the Arts.

High Speed Internet, High Interest

While items such as an active cultural scene, restaurants and breweries, public spaces, and a lively downtown core are important determinants in influencing a Millennial's decision to move to a small town, high speed internet appears to be crucially important as well.

The challenge for most rural towns and regions is that the major telcos ignore them, arguing the combination of sparse populations and difficult terrain make it uneconomic to build out modern, high-speed connections to isolated communities. This creates an infrastructural double-whammy: poor transportation infrastructure combined with poor (or even non-existent) high speed internet service makes the future for many rural communities look bleak.

Towns like Sandy, Oregon, and Kaslo, BC, have tackled the high speed challenge by creating municipally (in the case of Sandy), or community (in Kaslo's case) controlled internet service providers — bringing community-based, high speed fibre optic connectivity to homes, businesses, local government, and non-profits in and around their respective towns. In both cases, the combination of fast internet, lovely physical settings, a generous helping of cultural amenities, good schools, and affordable housing add up to an appealing scenario for prospective Millennial in-migrants.

Olds, Alberta

Olds (pop.8,600) located 90 kilometres north of Calgary, completed the build-out of its gigabit-per-second bandwidth network in December, 2015. 2.65 million metres of fibre cable and 15 million metres of fibre optic strands now enable homes and businesses there to access the internet at a full gigabit per-second for as little as \$57 a month. What does that mean? The internet in Olds is fast. Really fast.

The network is the brainchild of the Olds Institute for Community and Regional Development. They were helped by local government, which took a hand in ensuring it was brought to life. But when it was near completion, existing telecom companies declined the invitation to finish and run the network.

Rather than abandon the initiative, the Institute decided to take over the project. The group registered a community-owned and operated internet provider called O-Net. O-Net cost the Olds Institute about \$21 million, with the money coming from a provincial grant, a loan backed by the town, and a line of credit.

Mitch Thomson, the institute's executive director, says it was money well spent because the network helps Olds retain and attract business.

One of the Olds Institute's goals for O-Net was to attract new residents to town. Like Dean Humphrey, an apprentice steam engineer and avid gamer. Last year, the 25-year-old left his basement suite in southeast Calgary for Olds, drawn by the promise of O-Net.

“Here the best package was \$90 a month, and that's their top residential package, which is a gigabit up and down,” he says.

“It’s 40 times faster on the download and almost 400 times faster on the upload. You can really do whatever you want with it. You come here and it’s like taking the shackles off,” he concludes.

He’s a happy gamer, and he has also discovered a few non-virtual benefits of moving from the big city. His rent and car insurance are both cheaper in Olds, and his new home is within walking distance of three bars.

Sandy, Oregon’s SandyNet also provides gigabit bandwidth for its local users, and Kaslo’s community-controlled, non-profit internet service provider, Kaslo InfoNet, hopes to be able to provide the same speed for users in the North Kootenay Lake region in 2018.

“If you’re at all interested in technology, you’re nuts if you don’t go for this. To me, the future is technology.”

— Olds resident **Linda Hawthorne, 72**

Conclusion

Rural communities, in BC and elsewhere in Canada and North America, face a range of challenges. Perhaps none is more serious than the outflow of young people from rural to urban, in many cases stripping communities of badly needed tax revenue, threatening the viability of local schools, depressing local and regional economies, as well as stripping fraying towns and regions of hope for the future.

However not all is bleak. Increasing numbers of urban Millennials are becoming dissatisfied with increasingly high housing costs and increasingly lowered quality of life. Rural communities with a critical mass of community assets — including a vibrant local culture, high speed internet, good schools, and adequate housing options — stand a good chance of attracting some of these disaffected young people, to places that combine affordable cost of living with a high quality of life.

The key is to recognize, and improve where necessary existing assets, identify and work toward obtaining or creating key missing ingredients, then devise a plan with strong community buy-in to reach out to urban Millennials with an invitation to escape the city and embrace rural!

For more information on attracting young people to rural communities, please visit our website, at <https://www.bcruralcentre.org/focus/population-attraction/>.

If you have questions, comments, or would like to receive the BC Rural Centre newsletter, send us an email or call us — we'd be happy to hear from you.

info@bcruralcentre.org

(250) 353-3016

Appendix

ARTS Oil City (Pennsylvania): <http://www.artsoilcity.com/>

Artspace: <http://www.artspace.org/>

Attracting & Retaining Young People as an Economic Development Strategy (Will Andresen, Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs): <https://www.bcruralcentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Attracting-and-Retaining-Young-People-as-an-Economic-Development-Strategy.pdf>

Can vacant buildings and the arts help save small towns? (Des Moines Register): <http://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/local/columnists/kyle-munson/2016/09/05/can-vacant-buildings-and-arts-help-save-small-towns/89578422/>

Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation: <http://crrf.ca/>

City Magnets II: Benchmarking the Attractiveness of 50 Canadian Cities (2010, Conference Board of Canada): <http://www.conferenceboard.ca/e-library/abstract.aspx?did=3380>

Community Immigrant Retention in Ontario Guidebook — strategies & best practices to help rural communities attract & retain newcomers: <http://www.omafra.gov.on.ca/english/rural/edr/cirro/cirro-prog-resources.htm>

Creative Placemaking, Attracting Young People to Rural Places (BC Rural Centre): <https://www.bcruralcentre.org/2017/09/06/creative-placemaking-attracting-youth/>

Diversity and equity in Alberta in 2016 (Alberta Views): <http://albertaviews.ab.ca/issues/2000/janfeboo/janfeboopolicy.pdf>

Fergus Falls, Minnesota's Kaddatz Artist Lofts: <http://www.artspace.org/our-places/kaddatz-artist-lofts>

First Impressions (a Rural Development Initiatives program): https://www.rdiinc.org/first_impressions

Ignite Des Moines: stoking the Millennial fire (Zacahry Mannheimer speech): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xowvUr1UyHk>

Internet speeds in Olds drawing a crowd (Calgary Herald): <http://calgaryherald.com/life/swerve/would-you-move-to-the-town-of-olds-for-its-gigabit-age-internet-speed>

Kaslo InfoNet (Kaslo, BC's community-controlled internet service provider): <https://kin.bc.ca/>

Lanesboro Arts (Lanesboro, Minnesota): <https://lanesboroarts.org/>

Our Diverse Cities – Rural Communities (Bill Reimer, Concordia University, *Metropolis*, Summer 2007): http://canada.metropolis.net/pdfs/ODC_Summer07_3_en.pdf

Paducah, Kentucky Main Street initiative: <http://www.paducahmainstreet.org/paducah-arts.html>

Pathways to Prosperity: Canada: <http://p2pcanada.ca/>

Return to Rural: <https://returntorural.ca/blog/>

Rural Quality of Life (video featuring Dr. Laurence Moss, International Amenity Migration Centre): <https://www.bcruralcentre.org/2017/09/06/creative-placemaking-attracting-youth/>

Rural Schools Are Vital (Dan Rude, Principal, J.V. Humphries School, Kaslo, BC): <https://www.bcruralcentre.org/2017/02/26/rural-schools-vital-says-kaslo-principal-dan-rude/>

SandyNet (Sandy, Oregon's city-owned internet service provider): <https://www.ci.sandy.or.us/SandyNet/>

The Deloitte Millennial Survey 2017 (Deloitte): <https://www2.deloitte.com/global/en/pages/about-deloitte/articles/millennialsurvey.html>

What Do Millennials Want – and How Do We Reach Them? (Cheryl Lebon, Opportunity Lives): <http://opportunitylives.com/what-do-millennials-want-and-how-do-we-reach-them/>

Rural Youth Migration: Exploring the reality behind the myths (R.A. Malatest & Associates, The Canadian Rural Partnership, et al.): https://www.bcruralcentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Rural_Youth_Study_-_Malatest.pdf

