

Get ready for an older population: report

Number of seniors in B.C. is growing at four times the rate of working people

BY BRIAN MORTON AND MATTHEW ROBINSON, VANCOUVER SUN MAY 4, 2015

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If you're a senior looking for a great place to play endless rounds of golf or games of bridge through your golden years, then the Okanagan Valley's the place to be.

Photograph by: UWE ZUCCHI, AFP/Getty Images

If you're a senior looking for a great place to play endless rounds of golf or games of bridge through your golden years, then the Okanagan Valley's the place to be.

But if you're a young parent and want a place where your kids will have plenty of friends and outdoor pursuits, you may choose to head up the Sea to Sky Highway to Squamish.

Those are two of the conclusions in a Business Council of B.C. report that found, among other things, that B.C.'s population growth has not only slowed, averaging 0.9 per cent annually, but that the number of people aged 65 and over is growing at four times the rate of the number of working-aged people (25 to 64), "an extraordinary and unprecedented development," the study said.

According to the report, B.C.'s population growth averaged 2.6 per cent in the 1980s and early 1990s but has dropped to 0.9 per cent in recent years. While population growth is expected to pick up slightly in the coming years, it will then steadily ease back to around one per cent by 2025 and 0.8 per cent by 2035.

By 2027, the report concludes, the natural growth in B.C.'s population falls to nil, with immigration and

migration from other provinces becoming the main sources of growth.

“The most immediate implication is just the pressure on health care and other social services that go along with an aging population,” Ken Peacock, a report co-author and the business council’s chief economist and vice-president, said in an interview. “And there will be more seniors working later. The retirement age has climbed up and I think it will keep climbing. Workplaces are more flexible in terms of hours that older people would like to work and I fully expect that trend to continue.”

But the report also looked at population patterns in 23 regions throughout the province, with results showing sharp differences in both the current status and future growth.

It found that the Okanagan-Similkameen, which includes Penticton, Osoyoos, Summerland and Oliver, will have more than 82 people aged 65 and up for every 100 working-aged persons (aged 15-64) by 2030.

It’s a shocking figure, but the area already has the highest ratio of elderly people in the province, with 60 people over 65 for every 100 working-aged persons.

Osoyoos Mayor Sue McKortoff said snowbirds and other seniors flock to the town, and that’s not a bad thing.

“We’re a great municipality. Canada’s warmest welcome, we say,” said McKortoff.

“We’re willing to work with the fact that this is a senior’s destination and see how we can make that work,” she said, adding that volunteerism and part-time work, as well as the trend for people to work later in life, could help keep the town running.

The Sunshine Coast is predicted to be the second-oldest region in the province, with its ratio of seniors rising from today’s 52 people for every 100 working-aged persons to almost 81 in 2030.

It’s a trend officials in that region are trying to better understand and prepare for.

Emanuel Machado, the chief administrative officer of Gibsons, said the implications for the overall economic health of the area are not fully understood.

“People might not necessarily be working, but it does not mean that they don’t have money to spend, or income,” he said.

It’s a topic political leaders in the region are starting to take on together, trying to understand the issue and figure out how the region can continue to attract people who are still in the workforce.

Wayne Rowe, the mayor of Gibsons, said the town is preparing for an older population by focusing on accessibility, keeping its footprint small and removing barriers to smaller-scale housing like laneway homes. At the same time, Rowe thinks the area will continue to attract people who work from home.

“There’s people that are based here who are working worldwide,” he said. “They can do that in the morning and then they can go out and get on their kayak in the afternoon. And I think we’re well placed to attract those people.”

Not far from the Sunshine Coast is Squamish-Lillooet — easily the youngest region in the province — with just over 15 people 65 and up for every 100 working-aged persons, or half the provincial average.

Although the growth of Squamish-Lillooet's 65-and-over population is predicted to rise sharply over the next 15 years, it would still be only about 31 people for every 100 working-aged persons by 2030, just under one-third of the Okanagan-Similkameen and a tick higher than the Peace River's 29, which would be the lowest.

Peacock said the Squamish-Lillooet region is popular with young families for many reasons.

"There's lifestyle, affordability and it's an interesting region. Young families are moving there for affordability reasons, as the North Shore and Vancouver proper becomes very price-prohibitive in terms of getting into the housing market. But you've also got lifestyle and recreation. It's also about the same commuting time (to Vancouver) as White Rock."

The province as a whole has about 31 people 65 and up for every 100 working-aged persons (rising to 45 in 2030), Metro Vancouver has about 25 now, rising to 39 in 2030, and the eastern Fraser Valley has about 32 now, rising to 42 by 2030.

The report also concluded that B.C.'s population is becoming more urbanized, with 70 per cent living in the four largest metropolitan areas, and rising.

The report concluded that an older population will put additional pressure on public expenditures while governments' revenue raising capacity is diminished with a smaller fraction of the citizenry working.

As such, governments will need to look to policies and incentives that can keep people working longer and boost labour force participation among groups that traditionally have been less likely to be employed. New incentives to locate in smaller communities may also need to be considered.

Like McKortoff in Osoyoos, Machado on the Sunshine Coast saw volunteerism as a way through some of the possible hardship.

"The coast has a long history of volunteers getting it done," he said, adding that many seniors in the area "are not quite ready to go golfing all day. They still contribute substantially."

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