

Special Section: The Changing Geography of Small Urban Places

Guest Editorial

J. Alistair McVey

Campus Principal, North Island College
Port Alberni, British Columbia V9Y 8E3
E-mail: alistair.mcvey@nic.bc.ca

A study of Canada's development as a nation demonstrates the significant role played by small and medium-sized towns in the settlement process, particularly when one considers that the settlement pattern evolved from an "island archipelago", whereby the population of the emerging nation was scattered in pockets from east to west close to the border with the United States, rather than in a continuous belt (Harris, 1998). As the Canadian urban system developed during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, these small towns played a vital role in supporting regional economies. Over time this system came to be dominated by a small number of metropolitan centres which, in turn, created and reinforced core-periphery or heartland-hinterland relationships on both national and regional levels (McCann and Smith, 1991). Within this context, however, smaller urban centres continue to play a vital role within the resource economy, despite the fact that "small towns, rural areas, and the northern periphery have always shown wide swings in population and employment growth rates over time, largely in response to fluctuations in global commodity prices" (Simmons and Bourne, 2004). Nevertheless, certain smaller communities do thrive, even if their growth rates are of modest proportions—those which attract retirees or tourists, such as Kelowna, Parksville/Qualicum Beach, St. Catherines, Victoria, Tofino, and Whistler come to mind (Simmons and Bourne, 2003). Furthermore, some communities beyond the rural/urban fringe are increasingly attractive to commuters who prefer country living near a larger centre (Okotoks outside Calgary, Abbotsford near Vancouver, for example). This trend has also attracted the attention

of Jankunis (1985), who looked at the modest growth of small towns, villages, and hamlets beyond several major cities in the Canadian Prairies and the American Great Plains and suggested a typology that included these, and other attractive, features.

Despite their persistence within the urban system, small towns, as a subject of study, tend to be neglected as research favours the larger urban centres, even when the former continue to exhibit signs of growth, despite the many "real and perceived problems associated with living outside large urban centres" (Everitt and Gill, 1993, p. 252). Thus, the development of the Rural and Small Town Program at Mount Allison University and the Cultural Future of Small Cities Project at the University College of the Cariboo (now Thompson Rivers University) are, among other examples, to be welcomed.

The articles in this Special Section on the *Changing Geography of Small Urban Places* were all presented at recent Annual Meetings of the Canadian Association of Geographers (Western Division). They all deal with various challenges facing small towns and cities in Western Canada, particularly during the last two decades (although the paper by MacLachlan and Townsend deals with Calgary, in addition to Lethbridge). Two themes stand out. The first concerns the economic and social instability created by the economies of so many communities being vulnerable to international commodity market forces and the decisions made by distant trans-national corporations. The second concerns the role of planning in attempting to provide solutions to that vulnerability, frequently with limited success.

MacLachlan and Townsend demonstrate how the stockyard was once the nucleus of the livestock and meat-packing industry and an instrument of economic growth in most larger and medium-sized cities in the Canadian Prairies towards the end of the nineteenth century. Agglomeration economies resulted in a significant number and variety of related economic activities clustering around these stockyards. As a result, the stockyard became a most important contributor to urban industrial growth throughout western Canada. Since the 1980s, however, the stockyard has become a relict feature in the urban landscape in cities such as Calgary and Lethbridge, as cattle were shipped directly to the larger, modern meat-packing plants. In addition, as more of the value-added processing shifted to the large urban markets of eastern Canada, the position of western Canada as a resource-based periphery has been reinforced.

MacKinnon and Nelson examine the significant changes to the economic and social structure of Kamloops, a medium-sized city in the interior of British Columbia, that have occurred during the last two decades. As with so many similar communities in the interior of the province, Kamloops has, since its modern-era inception during the 1880s, exhibited most of the characteristics of the resource economy within the core-periphery structure of the province's settlement pattern—mainly in agriculture, mining, and forest products. The recession of the early 1980s, due mainly to a decline in international commodity prices, had serious implications for employment in these local staple export industries, however.

Since that period, while there has been some modest recovery in the resource industries, growth in the tertiary and quaternary sectors has been significant, as Kamloops has become a major regional service centre. Developments in the health, education, retail, and tourism sectors, in particular, have been responsible, according to the authors, for this economic resurgence in classic post-industrial and post-Fordist fashion.

Of particular interest is that this recent economic growth has been accompanied by several initiatives undertaken by civic leaders, urban planners, and the local business community—revitalization of the CBD and other urban core areas within the city, for example. These initiatives are part of a strategy to make the city more attractive to additional tertiary and quaternary activities. As many of these enterprises have their headquarters in eastern Canada or the United States, however, the continued dependence of Kamloops' economy on external economic factors has not changed.

The theme of change within a small community setting is also dealt with by Patrick, who is concerned with the sustainability of rural resource areas. He examines the particular phenomenon of the growing migration of population from metropolitan areas to beyond the urban fringe, as experienced in British Columbia's Georgia Basin. Nicol and Halseth (2000) have also referred to the planning challenges presented by the "chaotic consequences" which have resulted from these developments at what they have termed the "urban edge".

Patrick notes that the growth of residential communities at this urban edge is often at a greater rate than the adjacent urban centres, with a concomitant increase in dependence upon the automobile. This has the expected effect of increased traffic congestion, greenhouse gas emissions, and "mobility deprivation" for those not

having access to either a car or public transit. He suggests an alternative approach which emphasizes the contribution that planning can make to solve the problem of a lack of accessibility to public transit in these "edge" communities. To Patrick, the solution lies with greater consideration being given to land use planning and design in the rural residential landscape.

The frequently deliberate creation of towns and cities that, since the earliest days of resource exploitation in Atlantic Canada, New France, and Upper Canada, became the focal points of industry, trade, and commerce is another distinctive feature of the Canadian urban system. In particular, the development of Canada's resource-rich middle north was made possible by the building of resource towns that, often located far from the major population centres of southern Canada, have become the nodes of an "exploitation ecumene" (Hamelin, 1968) or resource frontier (Riffel, 1975). The dependence of smaller communities upon the vagaries of external economic factors and trends is demonstrated most clearly in such isolated resource towns. In their article, Halseth and Sullivan note how Clarence Stein's plan for the Kitimat town site in northwest British Columbia became the template for many new resource towns developed across the country, as local authorities and resource companies attempted to create sustainable communities through the employment of "best practices" in urban planning and development. Stein's experimentation with the British "new town" planning experience influenced later generations of planners of resource towns, despite the fact that this experience did not solve the problem of Kitimat's continued dependence upon a single industry. Focusing upon Mackenzie and Tumbler Ridge, two similar resource-dependent towns developed in northern British Columbia during the 1960s and the 1970s respectively, they conclude that the implementation of "best practices" in urban planning, while contributing a great deal to a sense of community, were no more successful in protecting these new towns from being vulnerable to external economic forces.

These papers serve to remind us that research into the economic and social changes experienced by Canada's smaller urban centres is vital if we are to understand the full impact that modern processes of urban change have upon the complete spectrum of the urban system. This research, as represented here, demonstrates that dependence on external economic and corporate forces presents policy-makers and planners in smaller centres with most, if not all, of the challenges faced by those in the larger urban centres.

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