

Business weighs in: How to grow N.S.

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Answers to static population include rural kick-start, 'venturesome people'



Halifax businessman Bill Ritchie (with mascot) says disappointing census figures on Nova Scotia's population require measures to spark economic activity in outlying areas. (ERIC WYNNE / Staff)

The latest Canadian census figures paint a discouraging picture of Nova Scotia.

Overall, the province's population grew by less than one per cent from 2006 to last year — the least of any province. We asked some prominent members of the Nova Scotia business community what can be done to turn that trend around:

Bill Ritchie: angel investor, financier and corporate director:

“It is definitely not an original concept: when you go back in Canadian history, the CPR gave free land away to settlers and immigrants from Europe. But go into the outer areas of Nova Scotia, around the fringes, and take blocks of land and put in some rudimentary services — maybe rough in some roads — then take out ads across Canada and in certain parts of the world for free lots.

“There would have to be a framework of regulations in place that you have to undertake to hold it for 10 or 15 years and you have to build a structure. But you would be aiming for people getting ready to retire or venturesome people. I think it would appeal to them. We need people, and this would spark all sorts of economic activity in outlying areas.”

Sir Graham Day, lawyer, business executive and corporate director who was knighted in 1989 by Queen Elizabeth II for his services to British industry:

“If I viewed Nova Scotia as a business, the first thing I would conclude is that there is no effective control over costs. On the other hand, we are very significantly over-governed. The provincial government is fundamentally too large. God bless the municipal people, but there are just too God damn many of them. Where school boards or hospitals are concerned, we need to get the money to the sharp end: the delivery of health to the patient. We need to dramatically reduce our costs so that we can reduce the tax burden for our citizens. In tax terms, Nova Scotia is the least attractive province in Canada.”

Thomas Stanfield, president & CEO of Stanfield’s Ltd. of Truro:

“The mega-trend to urban is worldwide as well as in Nova Scotia. It will not be reversed in the next while. The growth of government, service, health and education industries drives this trend and will sustain it. The traditional employer of the rural area is not growing or is getting smaller, going away or producing offshore.

“I think one of the keys is to sustain and build centres outside of (Halifax). To do this, you need to encourage employment and business development in these areas. And you need to think about some decentralization of the health, government, education engines. You also need to build where you can on the drivers of current employment in rural areas.

“We resist planning and making choices but we will need to do this type of thing. In the end, having large urban areas is not bad, but remember that even these large urban areas have tremendous subsidies of various sorts that kick-start and sustain the area.

“Urbanization has costs as well. So to look at restarting or enhancing rural areas is not a new way of thinking. It is just doing in rural areas what we have done in urban areas to the extent it can be done.

“Helping entrepreneurs to get going in rural areas and stay there is part of the key to job growth. Not all types of entrepreneurs are right for the rural area, but there are many who could and would (go there) if the table was set to encourage this. People who work out of their homes can be rural if the infrastructure is there to support them. Out-of-home is a growth industry today.

“The wheel will turn. In the mid-’60s, I lived in New Hampshire where the south was like our (Halifax), but over 30 years the central and to a lesser extent the northern areas of New Hampshire have blossomed compared to the earlier era.”

John Risley, founder of Clearwater Fine Foods Inc. of Bedford:

“It’s a tough subject with no easy answers. Part of the problem is that virtually every rural community across the country has the same problem, so it’s hard to have a differentiated strategy.

“Here are two ideas which would be difficult to copy, simply because there can only be one community which occupies the top spot:

“A Nova Scotia community should determine its primary objective is to be the greenest community on Earth and that it will reach such a goal within, say, five years.

“Such a community would become the de facto destination for any company whose products or purpose was resident in the sustainable/green/clean space. In fact, the community would seek out partnerships with these types of businesses in such a way as to serve as a trial horse for leading technologies.

“The exercise itself would serve as a huge attraction for media and generate notoriety and tourism interest. But this is not a trivial commitment and would require huge dedication from the community. However, the benefits would be enormous.

“My other suggested idea is to encourage a community to focus on becoming the world’s healthiest place to live. Imagine the attraction of the community to those considering where they might raise young families, and the slew of small business opportunities for entrepreneurs intent on using the community to test an idea whose ultimate market would be global.

“Again, this is no place for the weak of heart to go, but as the adage goes, ‘No gain without pain’ and the pain in this case is nothing more than a resolute determination to save one’s community, and in so doing, making it a very attractive place to live and pursue an occupation in an industry which has the promise of helping the world to lead a healthier and more productive life.”

Heather Cruickshanks, owner of L.E. Cruickshanks Sheet Metal Inc. of Halifax:

“We have to make sure the opportunities exist in rural areas. Right now, they don’t. This isn’t going to happen by bailing out large companies but by trying to enhance small companies and helping them to survive. They are the backbone.

“The bottom line is this: Bowater’s \$25 million went to saving a few hundred jobs. You could have taken that \$25 million and given it to small business and there would be far greater payback. Big business is big, but when it leaves, it leaves a gaping hole.

“We’re just not giving Nova Scotians a reason to stay when we keep chipping away at their amenities. Nobody wants their child sitting on the (school) bus for an hour and a half. No wonder rural Nova Scotia feels neglected. Halifax is becoming the vortex that is sucking the life out of rural Nova Scotia.”

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