



# Leaving the City Behind: Is Housing in Non-Metropolitan B.C. Ready?

/ Marleen Morris, Julia Good, and Greg Halseth

Over the past months, British Columbians have lived through unprecedented times, staying at home for weeks in order to slow the transmission of COVID-19. It has been a challenge that has forced all of us to live differently, and has many of us thinking about living differently in the future.

Given the experience of the lockdown, it is possible that people living in high-density regions of British Columbia, such as Greater Vancouver, the Fraser Valley, and Greater Victoria, may start thinking about moving to lower density non-metropolitan communities. If they were interested in moving, what kind of housing would they find in those communities?

## The Urban Lockdown Experience

During the lockdown, residents in higher density regions were confined to their homes which, in many cases, were small apartments or townhouses. With little space for a home office, people worked from

kitchen tables and counters. There may have been little or no outdoor or green space, and indoor common areas were closed and locked. When leaving their homes, residents encountered situations that put them at risk for virus transmission: small spaces such as elevators, long line-ups when shopping, and crowded destinations including stores, parks, sidewalks, and transit.

We have heard from health experts that there is a very good chance that B.C. will experience a second and even third wave of COVID-19, which could lead to additional lockdowns. There is also a strong possibility that there will be other pandemics in the future, and that the likelihood of these pandemics will increase as a result of climate change and a host of other factors.

With the first lockdown, employers and staff realized that people can work from home. Some companies, such as Shopify, have already indicated that working from home will become a permanent

arrangement. An office can be anywhere there is internet service.

If life in dense metropolitan areas has become challenging and uncertain because of the possibility of public health emergencies, and technology makes it possible to work from anywhere, will some urban British Columbians consider moving out of large metropolitan areas? According to recent media reports, this outmigration is already beginning to happen. A CBC report from August 2020 reported that, after the initial slowdown during lockdown, housing sales in Okanagan and Shuswap were markedly increasing. The boom in sales was being attributed to “the increased number of people looking for a change after experiencing life in lockdown.”<sup>1</sup>

Given that it would take only a small percentage of the urban population to move to create a large impact on non-metropolitan housing markets, the question is, are non-metropolitan communities prepared?



1 Split level home  
2 4-level split home  
3,4 Pre-1950s home

## Housing in Non-Metropolitan B.C.

Visiting non-metropolitan communities, potential migrants would find that much of the housing and many neighbourhoods date back to the 1950s and 1960s. These were built for baby boom families during the post-World War II resource-rich era in B.C., a time of rapid growth and economic optimism.

The authors of this article recently released a report entitled, *Building Foundations for the Future: Housing, Community Development, and Economic Opportunity in Non-Metropolitan Canada*.<sup>2</sup> Our research is based on a sample of 14 non-metropolitan communities selected from across B.C. The communities:

- range in size from 1,980 (100 Mile House) to 33,761 (Penticton)
- are located in all regions of the province

- include a diverse range of primary economic activity (agriculture, forestry, mining, oil and gas, manufacturing, retirement living, tourism, and government services)
- have unique histories and pathways of development.

In our sample, over 50% of the housing stock was built before 1981. Homes built in this era were generally designed with multiple levels and stairs between functional areas such as the kitchen, living room, bathroom, and bedrooms. There are also often stairs at the entrance ways.

These homes are large – more than one-quarter of the homes in our sample communities contain four or more bedrooms. Despite the large size, many have only 1 – 1½ bathrooms. Kitchens in these homes feature space for an electric range, fridge, and dishwasher. Microwave shelves, five to six burner gas cooktops, side-by-side

fridges with ice and cold water dispensers, wine fridges, and breakfast bars had not been envisioned when these houses were built. Very often, the laundry is in an unfinished basement. Electrical and wiring standards can also be an issue in these homes.

The housing stock in non-metropolitan B.C. is also dominated by single detached dwellings. In our 14 communities, the prevalence of single detached homes ranges from 43% to 72% of the total housing stock. These large homes generally sit on large lots that require a great deal of ongoing maintenance. Furthermore, given their age, these homes are not energy efficient and are more likely to be in need of major repair, which makes them expensive to maintain.

## Attracting Potential Metropolitan Migrants

For non-metropolitan B.C., there may be an opportunity to attract people looking to leave larger centres in search of more space and less density. This presents local

and regional planners with the challenge of developing policy and program options that will create the housing, neighborhoods, and communities that will attract urban migrants who can 'live locally and work globally.'

## Housing

Non-metropolitan communities may need to bring their housing stock into the 21<sup>st</sup> century to meet the expectations of metropolitan migrants. Design considerations should include enough space to work and study from home, flex spaces, and attractive options for smaller households.

Renewing the existing housing stock will be important, especially since much of the housing is in need of repair. Providing incentives for renovations, with a focus on energy efficiency and adaptability for aging in place, will enhance long-term affordability. Encouraging creative approaches, such as redesigning or subdividing large single detached homes into two or more units, could give new life to old neighbourhoods and address the need for diverse housing options.

Encouraging new housing will also be critical, and an important way to increase the mix of housing choices. Incentivizing new development within a community's existing infrastructure envelope will help reduce development costs. This could include infill housing in existing neighbourhoods, developing vacant lots, mixed use developments, redevelopment of brown-field sites, and taking advantage of locational synergies such as housing in the downtown core.

## Neighbourhoods

Non-metropolitan communities will also want to pay close attention to neighbourhood design and access to amenities. Neighbourhood planning may also need to consider that people will want to be able to be outside all year round, even during public health emergencies.

New considerations include having green space and pathways that allow for physical distancing. Interestingly, many of the post-war housing landscapes found in non-metropolitan B.C. have ample pathways,

connective walks, greenspaces, and areas for households to be outdoors in all seasons.

## Infrastructure

For metropolitan migrants, a move out of the urban area is only possible if they can live locally and work globally. Non-metropolitan communities will need to provide the infrastructure to stay connected through technology. High speed fibre optic networks will be required to support both working and schooling from home.

If some of BC's urban residents start moving to lower density non-metropolitan communities, they will find a housing stock that is in need of attention and investment. Planners may want to review the policies, bylaws, and programs that can support reinvestment in the existing housing stock and community amenities. If non-metropolitan communities are prepared for the possibility of metropolitan migration, they

can realize the benefits of new residents, improved housing stock, and the potential for economic growth. ■

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/interior-bc-outdoors-moving-1.5674388>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.unbc.ca/community-development-institute/news/building-foundations-future-housing-community-development-and-economic-opportunity-non-metropolitan-canada>

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