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City's GDP ranks fourth

Saskatoon growth spurt dates back to 2003: author

Murray Lyons

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Saskatoon is on a roll, matching Calgary step for step in economic growth, says Mario Lefebvre of the Conference Board of Canada.

Lefebvre, the author of the conference board's thrice-annual metropolitan outlook, notes Saskatoon continues to chug along in the top five of the 20 Canadian cities the board surveys.

For the spring outlook, Saskatoon's projected economic growth of 2.9 per cent places the city fourth among the 20 cities. In 2006, Saskatoon was third.

Lefebvre says local economies should usually be happy with two per cent per-capita growth annually, but Saskatoon is on a growth spurt dating to 2003.

"It means four years in a row of 3.3 per cent per capita," he said. "It's incredibly strong.

"Yes, Calgary looks above you in absolute rate of growth. But on a per-capita basis, you are definitely matching them."

And while Saskatoon is still gaining from migration into the city from other parts of Saskatchewan, as well as attracting a growing number of international immigrants, Lefebvre says the city is also starting to do a turnaround on its past Achilles' heel, that being losing people to other provinces.

"You are already seeing a change in the trend in terms of how many people are leaving this city to go live elsewhere," he said. "Demographic trends are slow in changing."

Lefebvre says the story of Saskatoon's steady economic growth is being noticed outside of the province, and people are making informed decisions to move here or stay.

"People don't move for the fun of moving. They move because they think they will have a better opportunity elsewhere," he said. "If it's less and less likely they will have a better opportunity elsewhere, they won't leave."

Later this summer, the Conference Board of Canada plans to do an index, rating cities on their social and other amenities. Lefebvre says this could provide community leaders with tools to know what attracts and retains people.

"The future success of Canadian cities will lie in their capacity to attract people," he said. "I think it will be really important to put in place strong immigration strategies."

He points out this is the way Winnipeg has been able to double its population rate of growth to 0.8 per cent per year during the past five or six years. That's still below the national average, but it shows the value of promoting immigration.

"I think Saskatchewan has to jump on this bandwagon because the population is aging so you'll have to turn to immigration," he said. "One of the key strategies of that is to

recognize credentials . . . get our educated immigrants out of cabs and put them in jobs they have.

"The more they feel they will be successful in the community the more they will move to the community."

Sectors where Saskatoon's economy is particularly going strong include legal services, agriculture, machinery manufacturing, transportation plus service areas such as retail and hospitality.

Retail sales growth has averaged nearly 6.5 per cent from 2003 to 2006 in Saskatoon, and indications are this level of growth will continue, Lefebvre observed.

"This economy has become more and more services-oriented," he said.

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