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Saskatchewan a hot property for developers

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SASKATOON - Something big is going on in Saskatchewan's small towns.

From the northern boreal forest to dinosaur country in the south, property is a hot commodity.

"I don't remember another time like this," said Ken Engel, executive director of the Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities (SARM). "It's a common story across the province: We haven't got any lots left anymore. It's made for a sense of optimism all around that hasn't been for a long time."

For decades, rural towns have resembled abandoned cocoons. They shrivelled up as the youngest people moved away, leaving behind empty shells.

Unconventional buildings - churches, schools, banks complete with steel-door vaults - all found their way onto real estate listings.

Now suddenly, being in Saskatchewan is the hottest thing.

"It's amazing seeing all of these new houses being built," said Darryl Senecal, SARM's director for Division 6, comprised of 48 rural municipalities in the province's northwest. "In Lashburn, guys are building houses and they're being sold before they're done pouring the basement. After gloom and doom for so many years, this is a nice change."

He operates a farm in the Rosetown area, where you couldn't give land away not long ago. Now there's none to purchase.

Many believe it's due to Albertans moving here but it's more likely Saskatchewanians returning from Alberta. Statistics Canada numbers show 3,300 more people moved out of Alberta between July and October this year than moved into that province. In that time span, Saskatchewan's net gain from other provinces was 4,324 people.

The overall rate of growth is the fastest in the country, nearly doubling Alberta, said Benjamin Tal, a senior economist with CIBC World Markets in Toronto, who says people are fed up with the rat race of bigger cities.

"They're looking for a place that's quiet, where the air is clean, and where they can raise their families and enjoy the time with them," he said. "Those are the values of these smaller communities that are being recognized."

Of course, there's always the danger those qualities will be lost as the populations increase, Engel added.

"But I think we've got a lot of open space out there yet to worry about that."

One drawback is the pressure and costs put on communities to expand their

infrastructure, but compared to the uncertain futures rural areas were once facing, "it's a nice problem to have," he said.

Another factor in the turnaround is the improved economy province-wide. The unemployment rate is four per cent, compared to the national average of 5.9.

It's easier for people to make a decision to relocate when job prospects are good, said Senecal.

Global grain prices have skyrocketed, the oil industry in the province is expanding and new mining opportunities are sprouting.

And the world's biggest producer of fertilizer, Potash Corp. of Saskatchewan Inc. recently announced a \$1.8-billion expansion of its mining and milling operations in Rocanville.

The Canadian Real Estate Association projects the number of existing homes in Saskatchewan sold through the Multiple Listing Service to rise 33.7 per cent this year, the biggest proportional growth in the country.

Saskatoon is the strongest local real estate market in the country with an average resale price in November of \$251,202, a jump of 50 per cent from a year earlier.

Shadow communities near the major cities have benefitted as young families find it less affordable to buy a home in the urban centres. From the air, Warman, Osler and Martensville have fingers of newly-developed neighbourhoods reaching toward one another. The large houses rival anything in Saskatoon's posh suburban areas.

"We've got a bit of a building boom going on, that's for sure," said Rosthern Mayor Doug Knoll. "If we had more houses available we'd have been able to expand our population by 200."

Houses don't stay on the market very long, if they make it there at all, he said. People in the know are snatching them up as they get wind someone's thinking of selling.

"That's the kind of demand that's out here," Knoll said, noting the commute to Saskatoon is probably faster than driving across the city itself in rush hour.

Over in Kipling, the housing market has brought out contractors with plans for the first new homes to be developed in more than a decade.

"It seems like every day, we hear from somebody who is moving and they wonder if we know where they can rent or they can buy. It's just a daily thing now whereas last year at this time, it just wasn't," said Gail Dakue, administrator of the town of roughly 1,000 people in southeastern Saskatchewan.

A row of new houses have gone up in Borden, a village of 275, selling for well over \$100,000. There are plans for more as landowners, taking advantage of the demand, intend to subdivide further, said Stan Foster, a lifelong resident who runs the general store.

"It's gotten so that you don't know every single face now. It's nice to see," he said, as he pointed out workers framing another new residence.

A few kilometres down Highway 16, the edge of Langham is creeping closer to Saskatoon with several new homes dotting the landscape.

"You can safely say this is one of the best years ever, if not the best, and it's going to

continue - if these communities can find lots to build on," said Senecal, who has one regret.

"I should have bought a spot on the lake a long time ago but values are going up so much in the resort areas, I can't afford it."

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