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## Go West!

### Windsor mayor touts long-distance commute for city's workers

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If the mayor of Windsor, Ont., has his way, the southernmost city in Canada will be the starting point of one of the longest commutes in the nation, heading from the auto manufacturing hub to Saskatoon, Edmonton and Calgary.

But Eddie Francis, mayor of the city of 216,000, has a great deal of work ahead of him if he wants to make his long-distance commuting program a reality, Saskatoon Mayor Don Atchison cautioned Tuesday.

Francis wants to keep families and cash-flow in Windsor -- a city hit hard by a downturn in the manufacturing sector -- by sending rotations of unemployed and willing citizens west to ease the labour crunch in Saskatchewan and Alberta. It's a win-win situation for all involved, Francis said, but the details of the plan need to be finalized before the Windsor-West route becomes a reality.

"Quite frankly, for cities to go into other cities to start asking people to leave their communities to come to other ones, I don't know if that's really the right thing to be doing, but Mayor Francis is certainly anxious to be able to do something for his citizens," Atchison said.

With Saskatchewan's most populous city in the middle of a housing shortage, finding accommodations for new workers may be the most difficult part of the plan. Atchison said it would be up to employers to provide adequate housing for employees coming to Saskatoon through the commuting program.

"We certainly don't want to end up with a situation that they've had in Calgary in the past where people have had to live in trucks," he said. "I think that you want to make sure that everyone has a place to live that would come out here."

Atchison, who said Saskatoon won't be aggressively participating in the plan at the moment, suggested temporary housing or partnerships with provincial and federal governments may be good places for Francis to look for solutions to the accommodation issue.

"If people are on unemployment right now and are collecting unemployment insurance it could be far better for the federal government to have those people paying back into the program instead of taking out of the program. Those are things that Mayor Francis is going to have to initiate, to begin with the federal government to see where it goes," he said.

"Right now it's a thought, but one never knows where it might lead us to in the future."

Still, Francis says the project has received a warm response from Atchison, Edmonton Mayor Stephen Mandel and Calgary Mayor Dave Bronconnier. Unemployment has been

rising in Windsor due to cutbacks in automotive manufacturing, Francis said from his office. The mayors spoke about the plan last month at the big city mayors' meeting in Ottawa.

"It's going to be an involved (process); it's going to require careful planning and implementation, but I think there's enough of us around the table that think it has merit that we need to explore, and that's what we're going to do. We think it's a good way to fill the gap out West, fill the gap here in western Ontario and provide for people to stay together," Francis said from his Windsor office.

The next step, said Francis, who announced the plan in his state of the city address Monday evening, will be to gauge local interest in the program. The city's economic development commission will be hosting an open house in the coming months to find the number of people already commuting to the West, how many people would be interested in doing the same and what their skill sets are. The city will then match people with appropriate job openings in Saskatchewan and Alberta.

The Saskatoon Regional Economic Development Authority Inc. (SREDA) spent last weekend at a job fair in Toronto with Saskatchewan employers. The authority's CEO, Alan Migneault, said people from Ontario have skills Western Canada's economy needs. SREDA, which is working to draw families and businesses to the region, is planning return trips to Ontario.

"Right now the growth in the Saskatoon region is being experienced by virtually every industry and every job category," Migneault said. "What we noticed in Ontario is that many times there's a two-income family, and one is currently working and one is perhaps laid off from a manufacturing plant. The skills available from that skilled tradesperson who might be from that manufacturing plant are complemented by the spouse who is also looking for work, and that's an area where we can accommodate here in Saskatoon."

While SREDA would prefer to see families permanently settling in Saskatoon, any help the region can get to ease its current labour woes would be welcomed, he said. Although finding housing for the workers is an obvious issue, at the same time some workers will likely find work building new homes and possibly, Migneault said, new apartment and condominium complexes.

"One of the values of bringing people in, even on a temporary basis, is that they can contribute to the construction industry and help alleviate some of the vacancy rate concerns that have been on the minds of some people," he said.

According to the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, Saskatoon had an apartment vacancy rate of 0.6 per cent in 2007. Windsor, meanwhile, had an average apartment vacancy rate of 12.8 per cent in 2007.

The long-distance commuting program is a good example of the effect the American dollar has on Saskatoon, said Eric Howe, professor in the Edwards School of Business at the University of Saskatchewan. For now, financial turmoil in the United States is creating a positive situation in the province.

"The thing I think is really interesting about (the plan) is we're seeing played out the reason why the U.S. recession, although I'm not predicting it even now, is good news in Saskatchewan," he said.

"With a U.S. recession, although it's going to decrease the price of oil by a little bit, it's going to disproportionately hurt the manufacturing sector in Central Canada, and that makes us better off because we need workers. We need workers more than we need \$100-per-barrel oil."

If nothing else, Howe said, the program may act as a trial-run for easterners thinking of moving west.

"Some people may be hesitant about pulling up roots and moving willy-nilly to Western Canada," he said. "This gives them a chance to put their toe in the water and test things out."

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