

Small Town Renewal ... A solution?

By Rod Fraser



An example of Small Town Ontario

During our weekly get togethers for wood carving, my two friends – Bob and Don – often object to my views on the state of the world. Over the past few weeks, they have taken me to task on a number of occasions on a topic that is close to my heart – small towns in Ontario: What has happened to them in the past and how they might be revived in the future?

I grew up in a rural area that was, at the time, a viable community of over a thousand people. There were two factories in town that manufactured wood products, four grocery stores, three hardware stores, a bank, hotel and numerous other businesses. The economy in the winter was slow, so our little town depended on summer

tourists to make it all work. We had a high school of 275 students and a public school with eight full grades. It was a wonderful place to grow up.

Today the town is a shadow of its former self. While the population is approximately the same, the high school has moved to a regional location (due to diminished enrolment), the factories have closed and the downtown is now only a few stores. The average age in the town is likely over fifty. There are older people everywhere.

This is true of small towns all over North America. My two friends and I regularly wrestle with explanations as to why might be so. Recently, I suggested increases in the minimum wage may have been a contributing factor. Clearly an increase in wages that applies equally to urban and rural Ontario is likely to destroy jobs in rural areas.

The latter factories do not have access to markets close at hand, and they are often less efficient. If the wages they are required to pay are the same as those in the Greater Toronto Area ('GTA'), they will soon be out of business.

While these facts are sad for those of us who love small towns, all this might still be fine if there were sufficient room in Southern Ontario for all the people coming here for jobs, the good life and a home they can call their own. With average house prices often over \$1 million, I wonder if this is possible.

As you might have noticed, it is getting crowded in the GTA – as well as expensive. If you want to invite millions of people to come to this province – I think a policy of decentralized development is the way to do it. After all, we are five times the size of France, with only 23% of their population. It makes sense for us to develop all of the land mass of Ontario as we grow in size.

As I mentioned earlier, Bob and Don are an argumentative duo. They certainly weren't having my minimum wage argument. They thought there were many reasons for the decline of small towns, and an increase in the minimum wage was not likely one of them.

They thought small town decline arose from globalization, the relaxing of tariffs brought about by GATT (now the World Trade Organization), and the desire of young people to move to the city to enjoy the attractions of urban life.

All true, and good points – I had to admit. I was personally an example of this migration. I left my small town when I was eighteen to seek a job in Southern Ontario, and then I stayed to pursue a university education. I married a young woman from Toronto and made my life in that city for many years.

In my conversations with Bob and Don, we often return to old topics discussed many times earlier. Or just as likely, we raise new items for discussion. When my

friends remained unpersuaded by my thoughts on the minimum wage, I wondered if an argument for a decentralized Ontario might be a winner.

I told them there is too much of a concentration of people and jobs in the GTA, and this (coupled with unrestricted immigration) is denying our young people the future we once enjoyed.

By the age of 27, I was able to buy a small house in the Toronto area that was solid, respectable, and within my means. It was the start of the good life, and it allowed me to build a solid financial future.

My grandchildren may have no such luck. They can look forward to a financial future of student debt, large mortgages (if they are lucky enough to qualify) – or perhaps being renters for the rest of their lives. It seems such a shame.

With the land mass of Ontario being massive and largely undeveloped, I wonder why we don't attempt to occupy more of it.

We could start by moving the provincial legislature out of Toronto to a more central location in Ontario, perhaps North Bay or Peterborough. And government offices could easily be placed in various towns around the province. This would free up land in Toronto for development (for those who desire an urban location). And it would provide jobs in the rural areas, to build up the local economies.

Just like in the early days of Upper Canada, we could

sell inexpensive Crown land in the north for those who would like to take a chance on small-town living in new communities. And as with the cities and suburbs of Southern Ontario, jobs would surely follow in the wake of this development (particularly if there was the political will to promote this policy).

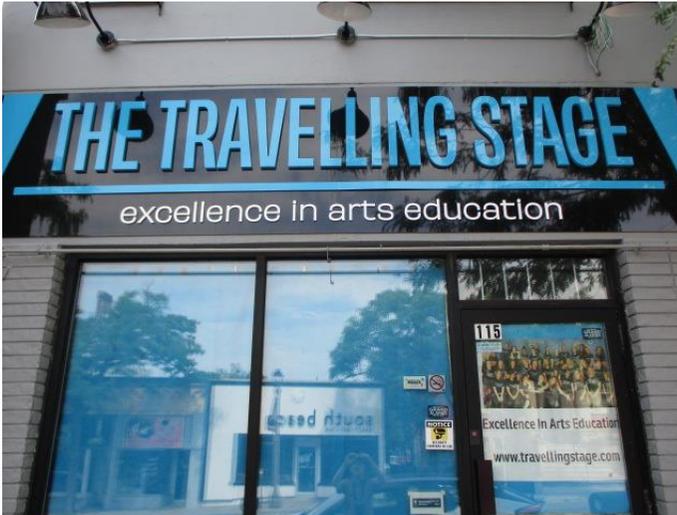
Although I live in the GTA, my town is a smaller one as these things go. In the wake of the Covid-19 scare, I've observed two new businesses popping up to take advantage of what these young people hope to be a promising future. As you will see in the picture below, a young man named Jack has taken over an abandoned garage and converted it to an upscale coffee bar.



Jack's new Business at Brock Street in Whitby.

And just around the corner, a new business called '*The Travelling Stage*' plans to develop art education for young people in the province. It looks very upscale, is

adjacent to a lovely parkette and has a riveting mural on its outside wall (presumably showing off the work of some of their students).



The Travelling Stage in Whitby, Ontario



Mural of Artwork for The Travelling Stage.

I wish these businesses well. They are examples of

what young people could do all over Ontario, if given half a chance. "Let a thousand flowers bloom", I say.

Often a country or a province is in need of a big idea or two, to see it through the decades ahead. John Diefenbaker was the last political figure to articulate a '*Northern Vision*' for Canada. Perhaps its time to resurrect his vision and put it to work.

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