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C-K getting older faster

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By Elwood Shreve

Canada's population is aging, but slow-to-no growth population communities, such as Chatham-Kent, will feel the impact sooner, according to a national-research organization.

"No municipality can ride out an aging population by keeping the status quo," said Derek Miedema, a researcher with the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada.

He has written a report titled: Acting local: Aging in Canada, which examines the effects of aging populations. The study compares Chatham-Kent, one of the slowest-growing municipalities in Canada, to Lethbridge, Alta., one of the country's fastest-growing communities. The report notes Lethbridge is not considered part of the economic boom associated with the oilsands.

Miedema, whose report is based on Census data from 2011 and 2006, as well as municipal websites, noted for the first time in history the number of Canadians preparing to leave the workforce, outnumbers those looking to enter it. According to Statistics Canada, he said, the number of people aged 100 and over grew by 25% from 2006 to 2011.

Both Chatham-Kent and Lethbridge will have to deal with aging Baby Boomers -- the largest demographic in Canadian history -- but locally, a shrinking workforce means there are fewer tax dollars to pay for the costs of an aging population.

When compared to Lethbridge, aging is happening much faster in Chatham-Kent, Miedema said.

Lethbridge is seeing growth in its population, particularly with working-age adults from 20-39 and 50-54. But locally, the population declined more than 4% between 2006 and 2011, except for residents aged 50-74, and 85 and over.

"The overall issues will be similar, but they're arriving much sooner in Chatham-Kent and that means decisions need to be made sooner rather than later," Miedema said.

Don Shropshire, chief administrative officer, said this issue has been on the municipality's radar for some time. "

Some proactive initiatives have been undertaken, he said, including hiring a youth retention and immigration staff person, whose sole focus is looking at attracting new residents and finding ways to make Chatham-Kent attractive to younger people.

A new community-branding initiative is also moving forward, Shropshire said, noting a presentation is scheduled for next monday's council meeting.

"It's not just the municipality that has to start selling the benefits of living and working in chatham-Kent, it's the whole community," he said.

The municipality has also been successful in getting an extension for a ministry of citizenship and Immigration grant to work on a strategy to help support newcomers to the community, which involves about 20 local agencies, Shropshire said.

But the CAO said, "there's no question the main focus is still jobs.

"If we're going to have people coming to chatham-Kent, they want good jobs," he added.

He said this involves trying to make people aware of good jobs that are available here, as well as the benefits of living in chatham-Kent, such as affordable housing and access to water-recreation activities.

However, Shropshire acknowledges: "I don't think anybody is pretending we've got this one solved.

"This is a big strategic issue for us, it's something we're putting a lot of focus on," he added.

Shropshire said the municipality is also trying to tackle this issue using existing resources and not impact the budget.