

Rural Employment Issues in Sarnia Lambton

Research Report

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Overview

Communities are shaped by the health of their local economy. A vibrant local economy can have a positive influence on many aspects of a community, including: population growth, increased employment, business development and expansion, service availability, a wider tax base, and others.

For rural communities in Ontario, economic vibrancy has increasingly become a concern. Rural populations are getting older, younger adults are leaving, skills challenges are arising, and there is a lack of immigrant attraction, all of which have stimulated a focus on rural economic health.¹ In response, the Ontario Government and province-wide organizations have become more engaged with rural and small town communities. In 2005, the Ontario Government added “rural affairs” to the Ministry of Food and Agriculture (OMAFRA) (www.omafra.gov.on.ca) which formalized government commitment to strengthen rural communities. In 2010-2011, the Rural Ontario Institute was created as an amalgamation of the Ontario Rural Council and the Centre for Rural Leadership. The Rural Ontario Institute is dedicated to promoting action on rural issues in rural Ontario (www.ruralontarioinstitute.ca). Both OMAFRA and the Rural Ontario Institute promote government funded programs, provide information, and encourage the use of resources to help rural communities with their economic development activities.

One important area of concentration regarding the economic vibrancy of rural communities is that of employment. As such, the focus of this report is on rural employment issues.

Research identifies many areas whereby rural communities typically underperform compared to urban centres. In Sarnia Lambton, local Employment Service Providers, social service agency representatives and members of municipal governments, agree that significant rural employment issues in our community include:

- fewer employment options
- low educational attainment
- low wage for some jobs
- lack of transportation services

Addressing these employment issues is critical for rural economic health and community growth. The aim of this report is to provide information about these issues at the local level, provide examples of strategies which have seen success in other rural areas, and inspire thoughtful discussions for a local action plan. Each employment issue listed above will be discussed separately in the following ways:

- The issue is identified along with an explanation of why it’s a concern (the economic and social costs involved).
- Strategies are described and next steps for addressing the issues locally are recommended.

For clarity and perspective, rural communities will first be defined and the overall employment situation of the county is reviewed.

Defining Rural Communities

Rural can mean different things to different people. When the Rural Ontario Institute compares population data of the counties within Ontario, it considers a county as rural if most residents *don't* work in a *metropolitan* city with over 100,000 residents. Accordingly, Sarnia Lambton is a rural county. Its one city has only 72,366 residents.

However, this report compares communities within Lambton County. There are great differences in population size between the City of Sarnia with 72,366 residents and the remaining communities which have between 704 to 14,515 residents. Therefore, in this report the City of Sarnia will be considered an urban area. The municipalities, townships, towns, and villages outside of the city are considered rural due to their small population sizes.

Although the town of Petrolia is located within the township of Enniskillen, each is considered as a separate community. For the ease of reading, townships, towns, and villages are referred to as municipalities. Each has their own governance system.

The Employment Situation in the County and the Resulting Impact

According to the 2011 National Household Survey, in Sarnia Lambton about 3 out of 5 residents 15 years and older participate in the labour force. Labour force participants include those who are employed and unemployed. There are 56,245 employed residents and 5,910 unemployed residents actively looking for work. There are additional residents who are technically unemployed but aren't actively looking for work (including retirees). Of these residents, 16,625 are working age adults between the ages of 25-64 years. The reason why these working age adults aren't working or looking for work isn't known, but it is likely that some would want to work.

A larger number of residents who are unable to participate in the labour force may result in higher numbers of individuals relying on income assistance programs such as Employment Insurance (EI) or Ontario Works (OW). In 2013, there was an average of 2,065 EI recipients each month for Sarnia Lambton.ⁱⁱ In 2015, the maximum amount an EI recipient can receive is \$524 per week.ⁱⁱⁱ By definition of the program, EI recipients are employable. In comparison, there was an average of 3,059 OW cases per month in 2013 for Sarnia Lambton; a case includes single persons and families of two or more persons. For single persons, the maximum amounts for 2014/15 are \$250 for basic living expenses and \$376 for shelter costs per month. For a couple with two children (under 18 years), the maximum amounts for 2014/15 are \$458 for basic living expenses, \$702 for shelter costs, and \$202 for the Ontario Child Benefit.^{iv} Not all people who rely on OW are capable of working. There was an average of 2,040 OW clients per month who were considered employable adults in 2013 (represents the number of employable singles and employable heads of families).

Addressing employment issues and lessening barriers to employment could potentially increase labour force participation and reduce the number of residents who rely on EI and OW for income. This, in turn, could have a positive impact on local residents and the economy. Residents actively participating in the labour force may feel a greater sense of self-worth and

hold a more positive outlook for their future. For the economy, strong employment participation is a positive sign of a prosperous community. Companies looking to start-up in or move operations to the county often look at the unemployment rate. High rates and a high number of unemployed people in a community can make a potential employer leery of that community and they may choose to locate elsewhere.

Fewer Employment Options

The issue

Rural communities have fewer employment options compared to urban areas. Residents of rural communities are less likely to be employed compared to residents of urban communities.^v Also, both employers and jobs are more dispersed across the land compared to urban communities.^{vi}

Fewer local employment options may have a negative impact on rural communities. For example, rural residents may have to find work in another community. For individuals who have access to transportation, commuting is a way to access employment in other areas while maintaining their place of residence. Those without access to transportation may have to consider moving to another community, and still others may need to rely on social assistance for an income source. These latter two options would result in a lower tax base and are undesirable for municipalities. Existing businesses within a rural community would also suffer as there would be fewer residents with disposable income to purchase their goods and services.

In order to determine whether the issue of fewer employment options occurs in the rural communities of Sarnia Lambton, three factors are examined:

1. employment rates
2. commuting patterns of employed persons
3. the number of businesses

Employment rates

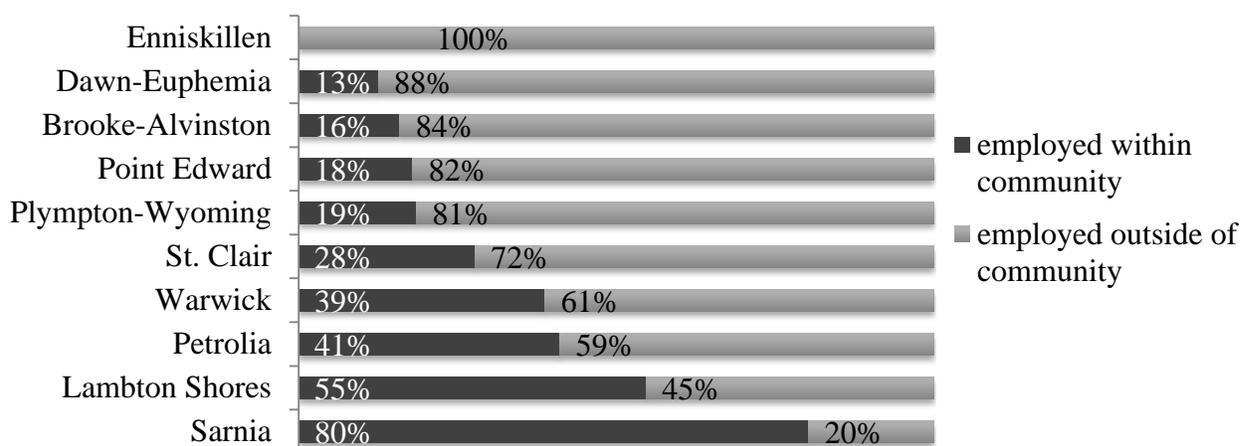
An employment rate refers to the percentage of residents 15 years and older who are employed. Each municipality's employment rate is shown in the table on the next page along with the number of employed residents and population size. In 2011, Sarnia had one of the lowest employment rates at 52.2% compared to other local municipalities. Lambton Shores also had a low employment rate. In comparison, Dawn-Euphemia and Warwick had the highest employment rates in the county. This means that Dawn-Euphemia and Warwick had higher percentages of employed residents compared to Sarnia and Lambton Shores. Employment rates and numbers aren't available for Oil Springs. In terms of absolute numbers, Sarnia had more employed individuals compared to the rural communities combined.

Municipality	Employment Rate (%)	# of Employed Residents	Population
Brooke-Alvinston	58.7	1,185	2,548
Dawn-Euphemia	64.5	1,080	2,049
Enniskillen	60.4	1,450	2,930
Lambton Shores	52.0	4,750	10,656
Oil Springs	not available	not available	704
Petrolia	55.2	2,360	5,528
Plympton-Wyoming	58.1	3,590	7,576
Point Edward	53.4	930	2,034
Sarnia	52.2	31,450	72,366
St. Clair	57.1	6,860	14,515
Warwick	62.0	1,785	3,717

Source: Statistics Canada. *Census Profile, 2011*. Catalogue no. 98-316-XWE.

Commuter patterns

The graph below shows the commuter patterns of employed residents for each local municipality. A commuter is someone who travels outside of their community for work. In almost all rural communities, the majority of employed residents don't work where they live. The exception is Lambton Shores where 55% of residents work within the municipality. Over 80% of employed residents of Enniskillen, Dawn-Euphemia, Brooke-Alvinston, Point Edward, and Plympton-Wyoming commute to another community for work. Although the graph shows that 100% of Enniskillen residents commute, the actual percentage is likely in the high 90s.¹ In comparison, 80% of employed residents of Sarnia work within the city.



Source: Statistics Canada. *2011 National Household Survey*. Catalogue Number 99-012-X2011032.

¹ There are a couple of reasons for Enniskillen's 100% outcome. One reason is of suppression; if fewer than 20 people work within the town, Statistics Canada counts this as zero. A second reason is how Statistics Canada counts people with more than one job. For example, some people may be self-employed as farmers and have a second job; if they earn more through their second job than farming, then Statistics Canada considers their second job as their primary source of employment.

The top two destinations of commuters for each municipality are shown in the table below, along with the average distance travelled to get to work and back home each work day. Although Sarnia is a top destination for most communities, it isn't for Brooke-Alvinston and Dawn-Euphemia. Most commuters to Sarnia come from St. Clair and Plympton-Wyoming. For most municipalities in Sarnia Lambton, commuters travel at least 50 kilometres each day for work. Transportation is required for most employed persons to get to work.

Community	Average Distance (2-way) in km	Top 2 Destinations of Commuters (number)	
Brooke-Alvinston	85	Warwick (110)	Petrolia (80)
Dawn-Euphemia	78	Chatham-Kent (225)	Petrolia (195)
Enniskillen	56	Petrolia (355)	Sarnia (325)
Lambton Shores	116	London (400)	Sarnia (300)
Petrolia	55	Sarnia (685)	St. Clair (145)
Plympton-Wyoming	68	Sarnia (1,295)	Petrolia (285)
Point Edward	10	Sarnia (535)	St. Clair (60)
Sarnia	74	St. Clair (2,505)	Point Edward (1,385)
St. Clair	59	Sarnia (2,640)	Chatham-Kent (390)
Warwick	81	Sarnia (120)	London (115) Strathroy-Caradoc (115)

Source: Statistics Canada. *2011 National Household Survey*. Catalogue No. 99-012-X2011032.

Note: Information for Oil Springs wasn't available.

Number of businesses

Businesses in Sarnia Lambton are concentrated within the City of Sarnia. According to the Sarnia Lambton Economic Partnership (SLEP) business directory, there are 1,448 businesses in rural communities and 1,959 businesses in the city. This source of information has its own limitations since it doesn't include all 8,372 businesses in Sarnia Lambton. However, it seems plausible that the City of Sarnia has at least the same number of businesses as the rural communities combined.

When the information shown above on employment, commuter patterns, and the distribution of businesses among the municipalities are considered together, it is clear that there are fewer employment options in the rural communities of Sarnia Lambton compared to the sole urban community.

Strategies and next steps

Two types of strategies stand out as ways to address the issue of fewer employment options:

1. Rural economic development
2. Job awareness

Rural economic development

Economic development activities can help increase employment options in a community. Those who study rural planning and development advise rural communities to invest in local economic development.^{vii} If this isn't feasible, municipalities should focus on collaborations and partnerships with community development organizations and formalizing their role with upper-tier municipalities.^{viii}

In Sarnia Lambton, economic development officers at the Sarnia Lambton Economic Partnership (SLEP) and the Sarnia Lambton Business Development Corporation (SLBDC) advise municipalities about opportunities and trends that might be beneficial to consider. For example, development officers help municipalities understand funding initiatives such as those available through the Rural Economic Development Program (RED). RED is a program developed by the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs for rural communities to strengthen and diversify their economies (see www.omafra.gov.on.ca/english/rural/red/#Funding). For more information about other funding opportunities or for advice, contact SLEP (www.sarnialambton.on.ca) or SLBDC (www.slbdc.com).

Given the importance of economic development within a community, an economic development committee or an economic development officer position is recommended for all municipalities. Having dedicated people in place will ensure a continued focus to plan and manage economic development strategies. Additional ideas, suggested by local advisors, include a need for communities to concentrate their marketing efforts on what they can offer businesses and consumers. Also, existing and new businesses might diversify and become more creative with their operations. Entrepreneurial initiatives such as home based businesses as well as value added businesses on farms are some examples. Rural areas can be great places for entrepreneurs to work out of their homes. Communities, businesses, and individuals can contact SLEP or SLBDC for planning advice.

Job awareness

Increasing public awareness about the types of jobs in the rural community is another way to address the issue of fewer employment options. According to local employment service providers, some job seekers think the only jobs available in rural communities are related to agriculture.

There are four typical ways to increase awareness of different employment options:

1. jobs fairs
2. work integrated learning events
3. labour market information
4. employment service providers

These specific career awareness strategies are outlined on the next two pages.

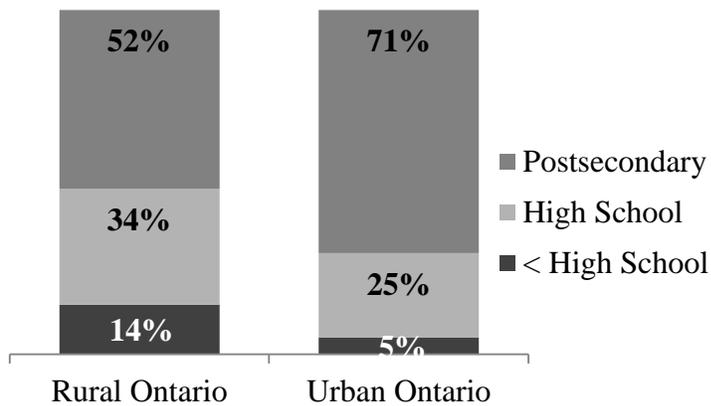
	Job fairs
<i>Description</i>	Provide a venue for job seekers to explore job opportunities.
<i>Other communities</i>	Many Workforce Planning Boards of Ontario have partnered on and initiated a number of career fairs in their respective communities. ^{ix} Typically, the fairs target current high school students. Sometimes the fairs focus on a particular type of industrial sector, like health care, agriculture, and energy. These fairs have representatives from companies and postsecondary schools promoting various career pathways. Sometimes guest speakers give short talks about specific careers.
<i>Locally</i>	SLWDB was a part of a job fair in 2011 about Green Energy, Agriculture & Bio-Science. Approximately 3,200 Grade 7-12 students and 200 job seekers attended. A job fair highlights a variety of options for students and their parents, as well as job seekers. This might be a viable option to revisit in the future.
	Work integrated learning events
<i>Description</i>	Events that connect employers and high school students and provide students with an opportunity to learn about the day-to-day activities of a particular job.
<i>Other communities</i>	The Eastern Ontario Training Board carried out a school-to-work initiative whereby high school students volunteered at local businesses. ^x There were 119 employers who participated and 53 students who received more than 40 hours of volunteer time. The Four Counties Workforce Planning Board was part of a medical-based camp that provided high school students with hands-on experience and job shadowing. ^{xi} There were 35 students who participated in the full week camp. Western University and local Health Units provided the training.
<i>Locally</i>	In Sarnia Lambton, a skills camp is regularly put on by Skills Ontario, Lambton College, and SLWDB. The camp gives grades 6 and 7 students an opportunity to participate in a week long hands-on program in a variety of different trades. The annual grade 9 career day (Take Your Kid to Work) allows students to go to work with their parents and job shadow or learn about that particular career field. Other related events that introduce students to the variety of careers in the community are put on by the district school boards.

	Labour market information			
<i>Description</i>	Labour market information is a tool to help plan career pathways and balance the supply and demand of workers in particular jobs and industries. Labour market information can answer: What kind of education is needed for a specific job, what skills and training are needed for that job, and whether jobs like it are available locally.			
<i>Other communities</i>	Each Workforce Planning Board of Ontario creates an annual, comprehensive local labour market plan report.			
<i>Locally</i>	SLWDB creates annual Local Labour Market Plan reports. It also puts out regular reports that focus on specific occupations or industries. Local labour market information should continue to be available from the SLWDB. According to their 2015-2017 Action Plan, the local workforce board will create a series of Workforce Focus reports which feature local jobs in demand. The day-to-day activities and job requirements will be described in an easy to read language for job seekers.			
	Employment service providers			
<i>Description</i>	Employment Service Providers funded by the Ontario Government offer eligible individuals free resources, such as information about who's hiring in our community. They also provide personalized advice and services to help individuals assess their skills and experience, find work and start on the path to skills training.			
<i>Locally</i>	<p>Contact information for Employment Ontario Service Providers in Sarnia Lambton:</p> <table border="0"> <tr> <td style="vertical-align: top;"> <p>The WorkPlace Group 265 Front Street, Suite 107, Sarnia 519-337-7377 http://theworkplacegroup.ca/</p> <p>Lambton College, Employment & Learning Centre 4248 Oil Heritage Road, Petrolia 519-882-4333 https://www.lambton.on.ca/elc/</p> </td> <td style="vertical-align: top;"> <p>Goodwill Career Centre 1249 London Road, Sarnia 519-332-4333 http://goodwillekl.com/</p> <p>Employment Service Access, Kettle & Stony Point First Nation 9156 Tecumseh Lane, Kettle & Stony Point 519-786-6780 http://www.kettlepoint.org/ESA.html</p> </td> </tr> </table>		<p>The WorkPlace Group 265 Front Street, Suite 107, Sarnia 519-337-7377 http://theworkplacegroup.ca/</p> <p>Lambton College, Employment & Learning Centre 4248 Oil Heritage Road, Petrolia 519-882-4333 https://www.lambton.on.ca/elc/</p>	<p>Goodwill Career Centre 1249 London Road, Sarnia 519-332-4333 http://goodwillekl.com/</p> <p>Employment Service Access, Kettle & Stony Point First Nation 9156 Tecumseh Lane, Kettle & Stony Point 519-786-6780 http://www.kettlepoint.org/ESA.html</p>
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Low Educational Attainment

The issue

In rural areas, residents typically have lower educational attainment compared to their urban counterparts.^{xii} Highest educational attainment among young adults in Ontario is shown in the graph below.^{xiii} Rural young adults are more likely *not* to complete high school and are less likely to attain a postsecondary education compared to urban young adults. Literacy differences are also found. In Canada, urban students typically outperform rural students.^{xiv} The lower literacy outcomes in rural areas are connected to the low educational attainment levels.^{xv}



These differences in higher education and literacy are an employment issue given that both are associated with better employment opportunities.^{xvi} This issue can become a cost to both residents and the community itself. Lower education limits the possibility of getting higher paying jobs for residents. This may impact a person's ability to support themselves and any dependents. In turn, it may also restrict the amount of spending that an individual can contribute to the community.

A high likelihood of low education may also limit the types of jobs available in a rural community. If local employers can't find qualified candidates, the businesses may suffer and even re-locate to another area. Also, jobs in the growing knowledge-based industries, such as computer information services or engineering consulting, typically require postsecondary education. If a community has a low proportion of postsecondary graduates, companies operating in these industries may not move to or start-up in the rural community.

Highest educational attainment for each local municipality is shown on the table on the next page. Although there isn't a clear urban versus rural divide, it appears that the communities nearest to Sarnia are most likely to have residents with postsecondary education. Communities that lie the furthest from the city typically have lower educational attainment.

	Less than high school	High school	Postsecondary
Brooke-Alvinston	22%	46%	32%
Dawn-Euphemia	27%	39%	33%
Enniskillen	17%	35%	49%
Lambton Shores	21%	32%	47%
Petrolia	20%	36%	44%
Plympton-Wyoming	16%	34%	50%
Point Edward	14%	35%	51%
Sarnia	18%	34%	48%
St. Clair	17%	34%	48%
Warwick	27%	28%	45%
<i>Province of Ontario</i>	<i>19%</i>	<i>31%</i>	<i>51%</i>

Source: Statistics Canada. *2011 NHS Profile*. Catalogue No. 99-004-XWE.

Note: Postsecondary education includes apprenticeship/trades, college, and university.

Strategies and next steps

In rural areas with high unemployment rates, there may be little incentive for students to complete high school and continue onto higher education.^{xvii} One way to motivate individuals about higher learning is to demonstrate the long term value of postsecondary education.^{xviii} Higher education is promoted through the district school boards and job fairs, which were already discussed in this report. Another strategy is through advertisements. The Eastern Ontario Training Board puts advertisements in a local newspaper on a monthly basis about the employment benefits of higher education. This strategy would be costly to adopt locally.

In Sarnia Lambton, higher education is promoted by the district school boards, college, SLWDB, and other organizations. SLWDB, for example, discusses the education and training requirements for local jobs in demand in its labour market reports. Continued demonstration of the value of postsecondary education to youth, job seekers, and the public in general is recommended.

Students or adults interested in attaining higher education and training may not be able to do so because of the financial requirements involved. This is of particular concern in rural areas because of the higher tendency of lower socio-economic backgrounds compared to urban areas among students.^{xix} Financial assistance programs can help address this issue. In Ontario, for example, the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) is a student loan to help pay for tuition and other school-related expenses (see www.osap.gov.on.ca). There are also scholarships and bursaries offered from governments, industries, organizations, and postsecondary institutions themselves. Increased awareness of various financial assistance sources could encourage more students to consider higher education.

Low Wages for Some Jobs

The issue

Residents of rural communities typically earn less than their urban counterparts.^{xx} Despite the relatively lower income levels in rural areas, higher education is associated with higher incomes in these same areas.^{xxi}

Related to employment income is employment status, whether someone works full-time or part-time. In Canada, the incidence of part-time jobs is higher in rural areas compared to urban areas.^{xxii} Local Employment Service Providers have commented that this is an issue among their rural clients. Part-time jobs typically have lower hourly wages compared to full-time jobs.^{xxiii} Lower hourly rates of pay and fewer hours of work may make it difficult for individuals to meet their living requirements.

Information on average employment income in Sarnia Lambton is available only for full-time employment. Annual salaries for full-time employment are shown in the table on the next page. Among the municipalities, Dawn-Euphemia and Warwick have the lowest average salaries at \$37,577 and \$37,627 respectively. In comparison, the highest salaries are for residents of Point Edward, Plympton-Wyoming, St. Clair, and Sarnia. Recall that many residents of Point Edward, Plympton-Wyoming, and St. Clair work within Sarnia. The relatively higher salaries for these rural communities are likely connected to the urban area.

The table on the next page also includes the percentage of employed residents who hold full-time or part-time jobs. Municipalities with the highest percentage of residents with part-time jobs include: Point Edward, Dawn-Euphemia, and Plympton-Wyoming. Although the highest, they aren't much different than the percentage of employed residents who work part-time in Sarnia.

Recall that for most rural municipalities, residents commute to another community for work. Caution is needed in interpreting the findings because earnings may not come from employment within the community.

	Average full-time employment income	% of Employed Persons Full-time	% of Employed Persons Part-time
Brooke-Alvinston	\$43,498	83%	17%
Dawn-Euphemia	\$37,577	73%	27%
Enniskillen	\$46,318	76%	24%
Lambton Shores	\$45,716	76%	24%
Petrolia	\$46,454	78%	22%
Plympton-Wyoming	\$56,019	73%	27%
Point Edward	\$56,629	72%	28%
Sarnia	\$50,866	76%	24%
St. Clair	\$51,421	78%	22%
Warwick	\$37,627	80%	20%

Source: Statistics Canada. *2011 NHS Profile*. Catalogue No. 99-004-XWE.

Note: The average measurement used is the median, which is the middle number of a group of ranked numbers. Income reported is before taxes in 2010. Income from part-time employment isn't available.

Strategies and next steps

One strategy to encourage higher paying jobs within the rural communities is through government funded incentive programs. Incentive programs such as wage subsidies, training grants and signing bonuses are methods to encourage employers to hire and train more workers. Often such incentives focus on assisting individuals who face barriers to employment.

The Ontario Government offers a number of incentive programs. A brief description of some programs is listed below. Contacting the Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities (www.tcu.gov.on.ca) is advised to determine the exact qualifications.

- Youth Employment Fund: incentives for employers to help young people transition into the labour market. Program will end on March 31, 2015. The program entitles eligible employers the ability to receive up to \$6,800 to offset training and wage costs linked with a job placement. (see <http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/eng/employmentontario/youthfund/>).
- Summer Job Service: a \$2 per-hour per-student hiring incentive available for eligible employers to create summer placements. Incentive can last up to 16 weeks from April 1 through Sept 30. (see <http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/eng/eopg/tools/referralguide.html#5>)
- Employer Signing Bonus: \$2000 to encourage employers in the trades to register new apprentices in sectors where there is a high demand for skilled workers. (see <http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/eng/eopg/tools/referralguide.html#5>)
- Apprenticeship Training Tax Credit: refundable tax credit (maximum of \$10,000 per year) for eligible corporations and unincorporated businesses employing apprentices in certain skilled trades during the first 48 months of an apprenticeship program. (see <http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/eng/eopg/tools/referralguide.html#5>)
- The Canada-Ontario Job Grant (see <http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/eng/eopg/cojg/index.html>): provides direct financial

support (up to \$10,000 with an employer contribution of 1/3 of the cost) to eligible employers for the purchase of short-term training to existing and new employees.

Continued engagement of rural employers regarding the benefits of government incentive programs is recommended, especially through the use of local Employment Service Providers.

As well, awareness should continue to spread throughout rural communities about promotion of non-monetary benefits as alternatives to higher wages. For example, there are many flexible workplace practices that give workers some choice about where, when, and for how long they perform their work. Examples include working from home on an occasional or permanent basis, and flex-time (variable start/end times of work). Research has found that using flexible workplace practices reduces workers' stress and enhances their quality of work experiences.^{xxiv} Younger adults in particular value flexible options.^{xxv}

Lack of Transportation Services

The issue

Individuals living in rural areas without access to an automobile face a significant barrier and impediment to accessing employment.^{xxvi} Those unable to drive or afford a car may have a difficult time becoming or remaining employed, potentially making it harder for them to remain a resident in their rural community.^{xxvii} Research indicates that certain groups living in rural communities are more likely to lack transportation, including: people with disabilities, youth, seniors, low-income households, and women.^{xxviii}

The costs associated with a lack of transportation services in a community can be significant. People may have to move away from a community in order to be closer to job opportunities. For those who remain in a community with no transportation options, their participation in social activities, volunteering, and other events may be limited, making them feel somewhat isolated. Because of the vastness of Sarnia Lambton, transportation can significantly impact the quality of life for rural residents.

Community consultations conducted by SLWDB have indicated a concern for a need to focus on rural transportation particularly as it involves access to employment (e.g. Community Consultation Petrolia, November 2006 & Community Consultation Summary Report, February 2006). Recent inquiries to local Employment Service Providers, economic development officers, some members of municipal offices, and other not for profit organizations have also confirmed that rural transportation is a significant barrier to employment.

Additionally, the County of Lambton states in their Housing and Homelessness Plan 2014-2023, that the lack of rural transportation has been mentioned in their Community Consultations in recent years.^{xxix}

As noted earlier in this report, a large number of individuals in the county commute outside of their municipality for work. Having reliable and cost effective modes of transportation is therefore an essential requirement for attaining and maintaining employment.

Sarnia Lambton encompasses 3,002.07 square kilometres and has a population of 126,199.^{xxx} Sarnia is the largest populated municipality with 72,366 people living within 439.4 square kilometres of land.^{xxxi} Twenty-five buses and 6 Care-A-Vans (specialized, wheelchair-accessible vehicles) are provided by Sarnia Transit, which is a public transportation system.^{xxxii} For the remaining 53,834 residents of the county living in neighbouring municipalities across 2,562.67 square kilometres of land, public transportation is lacking. There are a number of taxi service companies (approximately 8 in the area) that provide transportation throughout Sarnia and the rural municipalities. Private taxi services may not be affordable for many residents.

Transportation services for older adults and adults with disabilities are provided throughout the county by the Canadian Red Cross and Lambton Elderly Outreach.^{xxxiii} Lambton County Developmental Services also provide transportation services to their residential clients for medical appointments, employment and for social opportunities in the community.^{xxxiv}

Recently in October 2014, the Erie St. Clair Local Health Integration Network launched an integrated transportation system called CareLink Health Transportation. This system provides centrally coordinated transportation for seniors and other vulnerable populations. Eight service agencies from Windsor-Essex, Chatham-Kent and Sarnia Lambton (including Lambton Elderly Outreach and Canadian Red Cross) are working in collaboration to provide the service. CareLink, however, is currently available only for those accessing transportation for health services.^{xxxv}

While the issue of transportation for health services has seen recent development, the issue of transportation for general purposes, including employment, remains largely impassive.

Strategies and next steps

A recent report prepared for the Rural Ontario Institute sheds light on several issues that challenge an easy solution to rural transportation systems. These include:

1. The low density and dispersed nature of rural populations means that costs of implementing rural transportation (employment of staff and the services themselves) would be high.
2. The long distance nature of rural transportation systems would result in high costs (e.g. fuel and maintenance).
3. The lower tax base of most rural areas would make funds for transportation scarce.

^{xxxvi}

Further, a research report “Obstacles to Rural Transit for Local Governments in Ontario” states that it’s not common for counties in Ontario to have public transportation. According to the report, jurisdictional and boundary obstacles may hinder transportation routes that run across different municipalities. Public transportation is predominantly seen as a regional or single-tier municipal issue which can be problematic because rural municipalities have smaller budgets and reduced access to funding sources compared to their urban counterparts.^{xxxvii}

Although research suggests that there are many difficulties to the establishment of rural transportation systems, it's evident that several communities throughout Ontario have been able to create and launch such initiatives.

The Accelerating Rural Transportation Solutions project, funded by the Ontario Trillium Foundation, provides a wealth of information about rural transportation issues. The Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition and Rural Ontario Institute have collaborated on this project to compile and share knowledge of effective models and emerging innovation in rural regional transportation (see website: <http://www.ohcc-ccso.ca/en/rural-transportation>). Through webinars and 10 case study models, the project details how communities in Ontario have been dealing with rural transportation. Shared characteristics among successful transportation models often include:

- collaborative undertaking
- rural transit distributed over several communities
- availability to the general public
- accessible buses
- integration of regular routes with door-to-door service
- reliance on funding sources, community partners and contributors, gas tax rebate program and earned revenues (route fees, additional charters, advertising programs).

In order to resolve the issue of transportation in rural communities, ongoing community dialogue regarding solutions is recommended. A creative, collaborative approach, similar to those documented in the Accelerating Rural Transportation Series should be considered.

Perhaps municipalities could take the lead or be a key partner in a resolution. Certain funding sources (e.g. gas tax rebates and the Community Transportation Pilot Program running from January 2014 to March 2017) require a flow through municipal government.

Finally, discussions could be held with the LHIN, CareLink Transportation regarding the possibilities of broadening their client base from health-only related transportation services to transportation for all rural needs.

Three examples of functional rural transportation models are briefly profiled on the next page.

	Trout (The Rural Overland Utility Transit)	Ride Norfolk	Dial a Ride (Kawartha Lakes)
<i>Demographics</i>	Serves 15,303 over 8 communities 3,380 km-squared Population density= 4.4 / km-squared	Serves 63,175 over 12 communities 1,623 km-squared Population density= 39 / km-squared	Serves 73,214 over 17 communities 3,083 km-squared Population density= 23.7 / km-squared
<i>Ridership</i>	General public	General Public	General Public
<i>Operator</i>	Community Care North Hastings	Community Services Dept of Norfolk County & overseen by Ride Norfolk Transportation Committee	City of Kawartha Lakes contracts Mole Ground Transportation
<i>Service</i>	4 community shuttle buses (accommodate wheelchairs) 3 routes (door-to-door offered on regular routes) Access different communities on different days of week 7:30am – 4:30pm (but vary based on route & day)	1 accessible bus (under service contract with Donnelly Transit, Inc.) Fixed route service Access different communities on different days of week 8am – 6pm (Monday-Friday)	3 accessible buses (Mole Transportation) 10 scheduled stops on 2 loops. Makes additional stops for registered customers (within 150 metres of route) 7am - 7pm
<i>Funding source</i>	Gas tax rebate (Bancroft as host) Partners & contributors Charter routes Fare revenue	Gas tax funds Funding from 5 municipalities Fare revenue	Provincial gas tax program Fare revenue

Information from (Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition website (<http://www.ohcc-ccso.ca/en/rural-transportation>)). See Rural Transportation Case Studies and Accelerating Rural Transportation Solutions Series Webinars.

Concluding Remarks

An increasing amount of attention is being focused locally and provincially on the economic health of rural communities. One of the key areas of concentration is rural employment issues.

This report has outlined 4 main employment issues as they pertain to the rural communities of Sarnia Lambton. These issues include: fewer employment options, lower educational attainment, lower wages for some jobs and a lack of transportation services.

There are significant economic and social costs to rural communities and their residents associated with these rural employment issues. In the most general of terms, each of these issues may result in either fewer individuals being able to participate in the labour force or some individuals participating but minimally covering their costs of living. As such, more residents may be reliant on income support programs like Employment Insurance or Ontario Works. Some residents may have to move out of rural communities to be able to obtain or maintain employment. Existing businesses in communities might suffer because residents have less disposable income to spend on goods and services. New businesses may choose not to locate in rural areas if the community has a high unemployment number. From a psychosocial point of view, affected individuals may have a low quality of life or even face issues of depression.

An investigation of rural employment issues in Sarnia Lambton provides evidence that some of the best practices discussed in this report are currently being implemented. For example, work integrated learning events are teaching local students about employment options. Also, local Employment Service Providers are promoting government incentive programs, like wage subsidies, to employers.

The overriding conclusion, however, is that more community engagement and focus on resolutions for rural employment issues is still needed. Sarnia Lambton has excellent resources (i.e., agencies, organizations, municipal leaders, etc.). Extensively and creatively utilizing such talents can help move even the most daunting rural employment issues (i.e. transportation) toward a path of successful resolution. In return, the rural communities of Sarnia Lambton stand to increase their economic health and become more vibrant and attractive communities.

Please give us your feedback on this report by answering a 3 question survey. Survey link:
<https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/VTG8LZ7>

Endnotes

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