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Too many tiny towns in Saskatchewan?

Making big infrastructure investments in declining areas wasteful: economist

By Kevin O'Connor, CBC News Posted: Nov 17, 2011 10:37 AM CT | Last Updated: Nov 16, 2011 12:59 PM CT



Pense, about 30 kilometres west of Regina, is in the middle of a home-building spree, village administrator Jennifer Lendvay says. (Kevin O'Connor/CBC)

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Saskatchewan communities like their infrastructure money, but there sure are a lot of ways to cut the pie — 15 cities, more than 150 towns, 280 villages and hamlets and almost 300 rural municipalities.

And this is in a province where the population is only slightly more than one million people.

While some might argue a booming province that's awash in potash and oil revenues can afford as many roads, bridges and culverts as it wants, a Saskatchewan professor argues otherwise.

Continuing to pour billions of dollars into declining rural areas without any kind of restructuring is "grossly wasteful," says Rose Olfert, an economist with the Johnson-Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy at the University of Saskatchewan.

Olfert has spent years thinking about fixing what's wrong with population-depleted rural Saskatchewan — and she says just throwing money at the problem isn't the answer.

Economic regions proposed

In a major report on restructuring written for the Saskatchewan government a decade ago, Olfert and fellow U of S economist Jack Stabler argued that to try to save rural Saskatchewan, the province should be rearranged into 11 to 17 sustainable economic regions.

The regions would surround urban centres and would take over economic development, planning and services that are currently the responsibility of individual communities.

It would be an alternative to what Stabler and Olfert "You have tiny little dots that

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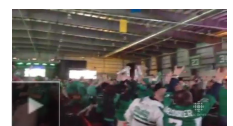
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Thousands of people celebrated along Regina's 'Green Mile' Sunday night.



Rider fans explode after first touchdown

0:35

called the existing "fragmented and dysfunctional" municipal government structure.

The structure is this: more than 750 urban and rural municipalities, most of them with a few hundred people each. In comparison, Ontario, which has 13 times the population, has 444 municipalities.

About 150 of the villages and towns in southern Saskatchewan have fewer than 100 residents, according to census data.

"You have tiny little dots that can't really do anything on their own ... and you have Saskatoon and Regina," Olfert said.



Pense, a village of about 520 people, hopes to embark on a major infrastructure project next year.

The province of "tiny dots" is a legacy of a time, eight decades ago, when there were more than 100,000 farms and 600,000 people lived in rural areas.

Today, following a migration to towns and cities through much of the 20th century, only about 350,000 people remain in farm country.

But much of the infrastructure has stayed behind. There's about 26,000 kilometres of highway crisscrossing vast, sparsely populated areas.

Add in municipal roads and there are more kilometres per capita in Saskatchewan than any other province.

Highways a hot potato

It takes a lot of money to keep 26,000 kilometres of highway smooth and drivable, and when that doesn't happen, the public gets angry.

Petitions to fill potholes, to fix highways and to build new ones have been regular features at the Saskatchewan legislature. And for the politicians in the legislature, rural highways have pretty much been "the third rail" — touch them and you get fried.

Two decades ago, when the government rolled out a plan to convert 1,000 kilometres of little-used asphalt highway to gravel, there was a fierce public outcry and the scheme was quickly abandoned.

All this wasn't lost on politicians in the runup to the Nov. 7 election that returned Premier Brad Wall's Saskatchewan Party to power for another four years.

During the campaign, Wall promised to spend \$2.2 billion on highways over the next four years — 64 per cent more, he boasted, than the former New Democrat government had spent in its final four years.

The NDP, meanwhile, rolled out hundreds of millions of dollars worth of infrastructure promises of its own.

Growth centres the way to go: prof

However, Olfert says, politics and asphalt often don't make a good mix.

Saskatchewan needs the best high-quality infrastructure it can

can't really do anything on their own ... and you have Saskatoon and Regina.'

—Economist Rose Olfert

'Let's suppose that the transportation infrastructure is indeed in need of repair, rebuilding. To undertake this across the board is surely grossly wasteful.'

—Economist Rose Olfert



Tiger Cat Fans Arrive in Regina

5:40

Arav video of CBC's Bonnie Allen speaking to Hamilton Tiger Cat fans arriving at Regina's airport Sunday morning for the Grey Cup game against the Roughriders.

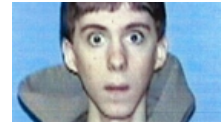


Grey Cup fever in Regina

3:05

The CBC's Bonnie Allen reports from Regina, ahead of Sunday's Grey Cup final between the Saskatchewan Roughriders and the Hamilton Tiger-Cats

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An advertisement for the TV show 'Ice Dance' featuring Andrew Poje and Kaitlyn Weaver. The image shows their faces against a background of ice and snow. The text 'ANDREW POJE KAITLYN WEAVER ICE DANCE' is prominently displayed. Below the image, it says 'CLICK TO VIEW MORE ATHLETE PROFILES' and 'YOUR OLYMPIC NETWORK' with the Olympic rings logo.

build — but the emphasis should be in growth centres and corridors, she says.

Spreading infrastructure dollars around to remote rural communities is not going to stem the decline of these areas, she says.

"Let's suppose that the transportation infrastructure is indeed in need of repair, rebuilding. To undertake this across the board is surely grossly wasteful," she says.

That kind of talk doesn't faze Jim Reiter, Saskatchewan's highways and infrastructure minister.

Reiter insists that despite record highways budgets, the government is being responsible with taxpayers dollars.

'It's not like we're willy-nilly spending money.'

—Saskatchewan Highways Minister Jim Reiter

"It's not like we're willy-nilly spending money," he said.

The priority is asphalt that boosts economic development, but there will also be money to maintain rural highways, he says.

Olfert's response is that every dollar spent on infrastructure in "declining or vanishing" regions is a dollar that could get a bigger bang in more economically viable centres.

Village looking to upgrade

Michele LeBlanc, the mayor of the village of Pense, says she tends to agree with Olfert that infrastructure money must be invested where it will do the most good.

However, she argues that Pense, located about 32 kilometres west of Regina, is one of those places.

Pense has a population of about 520, but LeBlanc points out it's growing, with new homes being built and more on the drawing board.

Pense also has about \$4 million worth of water, sewer and pavement construction it wants to start in the spring.

'If you have only 50 or 100 residents, the cost of replacing that infrastructure is astronomical.'

—Pense Mayor Michele LeBlanc

Raising all that money hasn't been easy. LeBlanc wonders how hundreds of smaller communities could possibly handle things like replacing outdated water systems or rusted sewer pipes.

"If you have only 50 or 100 residents, the cost of replacing that infrastructure is astronomical," she says.

But the alternative, saying no and winding down a village with a dwindling population, means wrenching decisions for somebody, she said.

And who's going to do that?

"How do you tell someone their town's going to shut down?" she asked. "That's heartbreaking."

Palliative care for towns?

Olfert agrees that the province can't suddenly stop paving roads or abandon the people and businesses in remote, unconnected rural areas.

But the status quo is little more than "palliative care" for dying towns, she says.



Saskatchewan Municipal Affairs Minister Darryl Hickie says amalgamating municipalities is not on the government's agenda. (CBC)

A decade ago, Olfert and Stabler argued that the current system, with its hundreds of cities, towns, villages, hamlets and rural municipalities, "has proven incapable of addressing the problems for at least 50 years."

Olfert says those comments are just as relevant today, but she's not optimistic major changes in municipal governance are coming.

As a result, the era of tiny towns will likely continue, she said.

"It's a political hot potato," she said. "Nobody's going to talk about it."

Meanwhile, Municipal Affairs Minister Darryl Hickie says the current system is working fine and forced amalgamations are not in the government's plans.

'At this time, we're not hearing any kind of issue regarding [786 communities].'

—Municipal Affairs Minister Darryl Hickie

Hickie noted that in recent years, there has been a lot more regional economic development work going on — so it's not just a case of small towns going it alone.

Hickie also indicated he doesn't think there's anything particularly wrong with Saskatchewan having more than 750 municipalities.

By his count, actually, the number is 786.

"At this time, we're not hearing any kind of issue regarding that," he said.

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Nostredamus

Having many small communities is not a problem it is a bonus. Saskatchewan as a province supports a diverse culture that is reflected in our communities.

Small communities are actually a very efficient way to manage services and infrastructure. Being a person who lives in a tiny community - I completely appreciate that the snow is plowed on my street everytime it snows - not just on the "main arteries!"

The people who want to get rid of Saskatchewan's municipalities and amalgamate them do not ... [» more](#)

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Dirty Dukes

Rose Olfert should be the one in the big chair, (the one in the Leg. bld.) .I watch every day a council (U.M.of Craik.) waste money like its going out of style , not the towns money,they are way ahead of that(20-25 years)one counciler openly said in a council meeting "we waste a lot of money and we are going to waste a lot more". They apply for every grant or loan that comes down the pike. and are still looking for more.Craik has NOTHING to show for all the money wasted. (ho sorry, there is ... [» more](#)

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Saskguy

The quick answer is yes, there are too many towns in Saskatchewan. Many of these places were set up to fit into a transportation structure (horse cart within a days return of a grain elevator next to a track).

When I worked in Saskatchewan, I had the luck to be able to travel almost every 'highway' in

the province from Canoe Narow, Missinipe and Sandy Bay in the north to Willow Creek and Elmore in the south.

Get a BCAA Map of western Canada and the USA and look at the road network in ...

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reginaguy1

The economist and half the people commenting on this could not be more ignorant! How do you people propose farmers are supposed to get their products off the farm and onto your kitchen tables without roads to get there? Are you people that clueless to think in the back of Wal-Mart or Safeway they grow all their own food? I get letting the towns die off with very limited options such as health care or other services and all that, but you have to maintain some of the basic needs like the power ... » more

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Bete Noire

"Meanwhile, Municipal Affairs Minister Darryl Hickie says the current system is working fine and forced amalgamations are not in the government's plans."

Mr. Hicke had better say that, because back when the NDP floated the idea of acting on the report and amalgamating RM's the Sask Partry (then led by Elwin Hermanson) vociferously protested.

Now, that being said, it does not mean that "do nothing" is the sensible or practical decision—such ... » more

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Once again, we bring in highly paid specialists (?) from some obscure institution of higher education (?) to give us their tainted and slanted opinion, thinking they can sway the mind set of people at large. I say that all this is just smoke and mirrors that is designed clearly to set up the political power houses to divert more of the taxpayer's money into over crowded and expensive housing in the larger centers.

Saskatchewan would be nothing if it were not for the hard working and industrious ...

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Saskatchewan would be nothing if it were not for the hard working and industrious ...

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DavidHickie

My own thought is that we could definitely do without the number of RMs we currently have. RMs were originally set up on the basis of what a person, traveling by horse and buggy or horse alone, could do without undue hardship. We however don't live in the horse and buggy age, and what 100 years ago would be a 3 or 4 hour trip is now 20 minutes. We could probably reduce the number of RMs by 75% without affecting the services provided.

That being so, the solution is not a forced amalgamation, but ... » more

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Gray Cowan

Right Rose, well it just happens small towns are where a lot of us make a living.

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bootslectric

the way i see it, these folks that don't want to live in or near the larger centres, they want it all, they don't want to travel to get stuff, medical care especially, and they want everyone else to pay for it. i mean c'mon now, every town can't have a clinic or a hospital? most doctors don't want to live out in the sticks.

there are more miles of roads and highways in sask than ANY province or state in north america. why do you think there are so many accidents on our highways, in relation to ...

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