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DWELLING: RESETTLEMENT

Demographics are reshaping rural B.C.

TREVOR BODDY

While media attention flows to the glamour growth cities of the Okanagan, Victoria and Vancouver, housing development action is also transforming vast sectors of rural British Columbia. In relative terms, the East Kootenays, mid-Vancouver Island and the Sunshine Coast have become the fastest growing areas of our province.

New houses, condos and apartments are rising at a hectic pace anyplace on water, and if there's a lively town with a hospital nearby, so much the better.

There is no single factor that has sparked this rural brushfire of building, but rather a combination of forces. The most important is an inescapable demographic reality: boomers are now in the recreation-retirement phase of their lives. Whether upgrades of wharf-side dwellings once home to fishermen or mill-workers, or bush hippie hollows transformed from commune to commercial, the baby boom is acquiring B.C.'s rural land at a frantic pace.

The boomers tend to buy these building plots when in their fifties as places to retire to on weekends, then to retire on permanently when they have left the wage economy.

The real estate industry has a name for it: "recre-retirement."

Amplifying this phenomenon is the gusher of oil wealth pouring out of Alberta. At first, B.C. felt this wave of investment only at Whistler, Panorama and the toniest of the Gulf Islands -- places where oil industry executives cashed-out to build sprawling dream homes.

The Albertans now driving whole sectors of British Columbia's rural real estate market are the oil boom's second-tier wealthy: engineers, accountants, surveyors, reservoir analysts and the like. Their trickle-down wealth has been transformed into property, pushing land prices in some portions of the Kootenays higher than the Gulf Islands, a scenario few of us saw coming for a once-depressed corner of the province.

Another factor is a money-gusher of another type: the huge ramping up of house prices for Point Grey and West Vancouver.

This property-fueled rapid increase of net worth easily finances the purchase of a second rural home, while maintaining a primary residence in the city.

No place has felt the effects of wealth from this source more than the Sunshine Coast.

Blessed with easy access to Horseshoe Bay through a fast, frequent and relatively cheap public ferry, real estate agents like Karen Kidd are doing land office business finding new homes for West Vancouverites along the coves and Arcadian lanes between Gibson's and Egmont.

Ms. Kidd's last Vancouver project was the ultra-high-end Kingswood at 14th and Pine, but she relocated full time to the Sunshine Coast to market a huge project rising on the former location of a much-loved Sechelt pub, the Wakefield Inn. "We have mainly sold to West Vancouverites, with very few from other parts of Canada or offshore," says Ms. Kidd. The 32-unit seaside project is 90 per cent sold.

With a concept design by West Vancouver architects Helliwell & Smith, the asymmetrically-curving lines of roofs on the nearly-finished Wakefield Homes project look like ranges of white caps rolling between Sechelt's pebbly beaches and North and South Thormanby Island.

"This is just the beginning" predicts Ms. Kidd. There are dozens of kilometres of water-facing, road-accessible land on both Georgia Strait and Sechelt Inlet ready for ecologically-sensitive developments, she says. Ms. Kidd herself is working with Wakefield Homes' owner Lance Sparling and development manager John Gillespie on several new projects along the Sunshine Coast.

Many of the projects driven by this influx of boomer wealth are being built with sustainability in mind. This is very much in evidence in the latest constructions around Rockwater Resort at nearby Secret Cove. These canvas-walled-and-roofed rooms, called "tenthouses", are set on radiant slab decks for near year-round use. There are seven open now, with another half dozen slated to be ready by next summer, all linked by raised walkways that tread lightly in the rain forest.

The Rockwater tenthouses are a high-end reworking of kid's tree-houses. Built in a gorgeous arbutus grove above pounding Pacific shores, these constructions demonstrate that there is a point where high-end luxury meets barely-there shelter, where five-star hotel meets backpacker basics.

tboddy@globeandmail.com