



BECOMING OLDER – AND WISER



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Coastal resource towns offer a number of excellent retirement-community options to attract today's seniors, who are the wealthiest in B.C.'s history.

BY OZZIE JUROCK

More than 1,000 Canadians will turn 60 years of age every day this year. In British Columbia, 46,000 people hit the big 60 by the end of 2006.

British Columbia, which already has the highest ratio of seniors in the country, will continue to attract a grey wave of retirees, many of whom represent the wealthiest retirees in history. Not only have they made a fortune in their own homes, but also these are dual-pension income retirees.

This year, therefore, is the time to consider investing in retirement communities, either for your own golden years or to cash in when the wave hits.

We have all heard of the booming Okanagan – the Jurock Real Estate Insider has recommended Vernon, Kelowna, Osoyoos, Oliver and dozens of other communities for years – it has been a drawing point for retirees, but these areas have become quite pricey, so let's take a different approach. Today's retirees are looking for less hustle and bustle but great natural environments and lower prices and they may strike out into new territory.

Here are some B.C. coastal resource towns where recent forestry sector troubles have led to a dip in

housing values. These towns nevertheless have good infrastructure and excellent recreational facilities and are close enough to a major city to attract retirees.

Residents of resource towns react quickly to threats to the local economy, which is often dominated by a single employer. Blue-collar workers are likely to pack up and leave, a simultaneous move that spikes listings and often creates a dip, sometimes quite transitory, in the local housing market. Such may be the case with the towns profiled here, all of which have seen a sudden rise in listings and a corresponding drop in average prices in the past three months.

The forestry industry, especially the pulp markets, is cyclical and all of the towns mentioned here could emerge stronger than ever. Right now, though, there is an opportunity to secure coastal retirement real estate in these markets at relatively low prices.

SQUAMISH

The January 2006 closure of Western Forest Products' woodfibre pulp mill followed the earlier shutdown of the town's only sawmill and the BC Rail work yards, which basically gutted the town's blue-collar employment in less than five years. Those 200 woodfibre union jobs are sorely missed.

Currently, there are 600 new condo units under construction downtown with an additional 2,000 units proposed, according to the town's planning department. New projects have listing prices starting at around \$320 per square foot. Today, at an average of \$419,000, the average detached house price is down nine per cent from 2004.



Of course, Squamish still has a lot going for it. Close to both Whistler and Vancouver, it will benefit from the \$600-million upgrade to the Sea to Sky Highway, a new university, and eco-tourism. If you are looking for recreational property, now may be the time to try your low-ball offers.

Powell River, Port Alberni, Crofton/Cowichan Valley are other examples of resource towns where lower prices may be expected this year as fears over layoffs lead to higher listings and prices that have tracked lower in the past few months.

POWELL RIVER

A single-family house in Powell River that was assessed at \$138,900 in 2006 is assessed at \$171,100 in 2007, a 23 per cent increase, reports BC Assessment. Yet, we found a dozen detached houses under \$200,000 last month in Powell River, half of these under \$160,000.

A condominium apartment that was assessed at \$104,200 in 2006 was assessed at \$138,900 a year later, a 33-per-cent increase. You can find condominiums, even two-bedroom suites, for under \$100,000.

The real future for Powell River appears to be a retirement and recreational market. There are great golf courses there – I played the fine Myrtle Point golf course last summer. In the rural area, the average assessed house price is up 22 per cent to \$254,000, but there are some nuggets. We found a FSBO 1,200-square-foot house and a workshop on a 2.6-hectare site, backing on a lake 13 kilometres from town, for \$269,000 (604-485-4717).

This spring may be an ideal time to buy for the long term in Powell River – for example, a retirement home. Real estate prices are among the lowest on the coast.

PORT ALBERNI

Port Alberni, population about 30,000 in the region, is in the near centre of Vancouver Island, with an 80-kilometre inlet that reaches to the Pacific Ocean. It is about an hour's drive west of Nanaimo and has excellent recreational (including golf) and medical facilities.

The major employer is the Catalyst pulp mill, which laid off 60 workers last fall and there are serious concerns about the mill's viability, which is at least partly to blame for a dramatic increase in the number of homes for sale. Fourteen condo listings are for pre-sale units in a single new complex (now under construction with two-bedroom ocean-view condos starting at \$189,900).

Assessed values for a detached house have risen about \$35,000 to an average of \$179,100. Strata apartment assessments rose to an average of \$117,300 from \$70,100, reports BC Assessments. These prices are still among the lowest in the mid-Island market.

There are more than 40 detached houses listed for sale in Port Alberni under \$175,000 and while we found some condominiums under the assessed value, there is a shortage of lower-priced condos. The best buys and choice appear to be in detached houses.



CROFTON

Crofton, with 1,000 employees at the Catalyst pulp mill, is the economic anchor of the Cowichan, situated between Nanaimo and Victoria. The valley is home to Lake Cowichan, where a rush of new developments and retirees have driven assessed single family house prices to an average of \$212,400, up 18 per cent from a year ago, and condominium prices up 26 per cent to \$124,900.

The Crofton mill has been the focus of intense environmental pressure for the past three years and locals are worried about the future of the area's main employer.

Despite the spike in assessed values the average MLS price dropped nearly \$20,000 between mid-November 2006 and the end of December, to \$237,400, ending down seven per cent from December, 2005. Listings of detached houses shot up 32 per cent in the same period, to 300.

Some deals are emerging. We found a nice four-bedroom renovated house with a lake view in Youbou for \$199,900. □

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As Okanagan real estate becomes more expensive, this could be a good time to secure coastal retirement real estate at relatively low prices.