

The Remote Living Revolution: How Remote Living Has Impacted Suburbia and the Greater Toronto Area

At the start of the pandemic, the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) experienced a drastic shift in its everyday lifestyle. Taken from the social environments and bustle of the city, all of its populace was asked to stay in their homes for two weeks due to a virus outbreak we now know is COVID-19. In order to stop the virus spread, individuals and families living in the GTA were asked to move their everyday activities, work, social lives, and schooling to an online remote platform. People quickly realised they could continue their lives whenever they pleased, as long as they had access to the technology needed. This abrupt increase in telepresence deteriorated the attachment many had to cities, resulting in a drastic spread from the city, to suburbia. Two weeks turned into two months, and two months, into two years of remote living and virtual living. For two years a fire has been ignited beneath the suburban and rural real estate, and such has impacted the population and the consequent economic growth of smaller rural towns, the housing affordability in suburban areas, and the employment within the GTA. This can be seen in the suburban regions surrounding Toronto such as the Halton Hill Region.

Population Growth in Suburbia

Amid the virtual living revolution, many have fled major cities, and have opted to live in the previously overlooked, more diminutive rural towns surrounding Toronto; places that before the pandemic saw very slow, quiet housing markets. City life is known to attract a younger generation, however many older Torontonians, many with families, are taking the opportunity to move their virtual living to the suburbs (Hartmans, 2020). The suburbs offer families considerably more space than downtown Toronto, and with the virtual living revolution, moving has never been more appealing. According to Claudia Castro, “As more people recognize that they may not need to be in the office five days a week for the foreseeable future, many are revisiting detached properties in the region so they can have more space.” (Castro, 2020). This is immensely reflected in the housing market of Oakville, Burlington, and most drastically, the Halton Region, which is just west of Toronto. The Halton region; once a smaller, quieter rural region within the GTA, now has hundreds of

Torontonians moving into the area. This rapid increase in home sales began just as the pandemic did. According to a data analysis done by Zoocasa, 291 detached homes were sold in Halton Region just last June, a 22% increase from previous years (Zoocasa, 2020). The geographical distribution of residents from major, previously denser cities will reflect itself in an economic distribution towards smaller towns. This is reflected in the increase in the population density of the Halton Region, which has grown by more than 20% (Allen, 2022). While the lockdowns have negatively impacted non-essential businesses, especially in regions like Halton Region, in years to come, these areas may see a population increase that can help reprimand the economic conditions the GTA faced during the pandemic.

Employment in the GTA

At the start of the pandemic, the employment rates in the GTA plummeted due to the economic impacts of the lockdowns. The public health restrictions put in place at the start of the pandemic caused numerous nonessential businesses to shut down, consequently causing these businesses to lay off a large number of their employees (Halton Region Economic Review, 2020). This was seen in Halton specifically, its Regional Chair stating that “ Many sectors, particularly retail and foodservice establishments, had to downsize their workforce and faced large-scale temporary layoffs due to the pandemic.” (Halton Region Economic Review). However, according to a study by the Financial Accountability Officer, Ontario's labour market fared well in 2021, adding 344,800 jobs and lowering the unemployment rate to 8% from 9.6% in 2020 (Lavenduski, 2022). People are continuing to move from the core downtown Toronto areas to places like Halton, and as COVID-19 restrictions decrease, there will be an increase in the use of small non-essential businesses. As this becomes the new normal, and the population in rural regions steadily increases, so will the need and supply of employment. This has already been shown in the rebound in employment throughout the GTA. According to the Toronto Regional Real Estate Board, in February of 2022, the unemployment rate in Toronto was 7.4% down 0.3% from the previous month (CREA, 2022). However, for those moving to smaller rural areas due to the unemployment crisis at the start of the pandemic, they will be faced with the repercussions of such a rapid increase in demand for housing and employment.

Housing Affordability in Suburbia

As people become more comfortable with virtual living and continue to move to the suburbs, the subsequent surge in housing sales activity has resulted in limited supply. With high demand and limited supply, the pricing for housing in regions like Halton Region has skyrocketed. According to The Toronto Regional Real Estate Board (TRREB), research predicts the average selling price of all home types in Halton will increase, some possibly reaching 1.025 million (Toronto Regional Real Estate Board, 2022). Places like Halton Region; regions that previously had arid, almost dormant housing markets, are now experiencing highly-priced bidding wars, all in just two years. This will reflect itself in the economic status of those moving to the Halton Region, and with a predicted annual population increase of 12000 to 14000, Halton Region is sure to see huge economic growth (UReach Toronto, 2022). However, the competition for houses in regions like Halton Region will make it difficult for those who cannot meet the increasing pricing expectations to purchase homes. The tight market conditions throughout the GTA continue to increase average selling prices, making housing less and less affordable for average-income citizens. With the average income of a Torontonian being around \$60,000, and an average housing price reaching the millions in many rural areas, the common Canadian citizen will likely not be able to afford rural housing (Average Salary Survey, 2022). This is a reflection of the grander housing price increase Canada has experienced since the start of the pandemic, which according to Douglas Todd, has been a whopping 34% increase since march of 2020 (Todd, 2021). The lack of supply is worsening the housing affordability of the GTA and as it continues to slow, rebalancing supply and demand will fall onto the shoulders of demand—buyers. Buyers who can't afford homes in areas like Halton Region will run to less expensive, smaller towns that have not yet felt the impact of the spread from major downtown cities. The density will continue to spread, as will the population, and consequently, supply will continue to decrease in smaller outlander towns. TRREBS chief market analyst even states, “As we move toward 2022, expect market conditions to become tighter...” (Mercer, 2021) So, while smaller, slower housing markets are now benefiting from a population increase, buyers are faced with the harsh reality of a decrease in affordable housing.

Overall Future Predictions

The Halton Region acts as an explicit example of the path many rural regions may take in the next few years. The population growth has sprouted economic growth in Halton Region, which can be seen throughout the GTA. This has also partly caused an increase in the employment rates, which have steadily approached recovery from the drastic dips it says at the start of the pandemic. Nevertheless, this population increase will continuously increase demand, and with little supply, rural housing will become less and less affordable. The fire ignited beneath the suburban and rural real estate has not seemed to burn out, and as more and more families seek residence within suburbia, it may not die down any time soon. I believe that older generations will continue to disperse throughout rural areas, because of the familiarity that many now have towards virtual living. Virtual living has found a permanent place in the everyday lives of many, and as technology continues to advance, virtual living will only become more and more common. Furthermore, it is much easier for families with children, as it equips families with a way to stay home while still accomplishing essential tasks. This means the increase in families and older generations moving to suburbia will persist. Due to this increase in population, employment rates will rebound and hopefully recover throughout the GTA. This is already reflected in the employment rates of 2022 so far. However, as housing becomes increasingly expensive in rural areas, younger generations may seek housing in the city. The city offers smaller properties with a higher concentration of condos and apartment complexes, and it is a social attraction now more than ever due to the removal of mask mandates arriving this month. So while we return to the lifestyles before the start of the pandemic, virtual living has become the new reality of Torontonians and will continue to impact both rural and urban life in years to come.

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