



TRANSPORTATION RESOURCES FOR NEWCOMERS TO SARNIA-LAMBTON AN ASSET AND GAP ANALYSIS

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Overview

In rural-urban communities such as Sarnia-Lambton, transportation is not only about services offered within the region's urban centre but also the pathways and services that connect the centre with its rural surroundings and with other urban centres that its residents routinely connect with, including London, Chatham, Windsor, Goderich and Owen Sound. Recognizing these different modes of physical connection is especially important when considering the choices available to the region's immigrant community and temporary residents.

That a relationship exists between where people choose to live and where people work is supported by a substantial body of research. However, a similar volume of research suggests that people are willing to put some distance between their homes and workplace to locate in a neighbourhood with certain amenities or a community with specific demographics or to obtain a particular type of housing (Kures & Deller 2022, p. 55).

Many factors also condition how much distance an individual is willing to put between these two points, or between housing and other basics of life such as shopping, recreation, education and health services. Factors such as occupation, gender and household structure can also shape attitudes towards commuting (Kures & Deller 2022, p. 55).

Further, studies have shown that commuting is a fact of life in rural and small-town Canada. Health and social services are increasingly consolidated in these regions' urban communities. Recreation, such as youth team sports, routinely involve competing in different communities. One study has put the threshold between too much commute and not enough benefits at, on average, 118 kilometres. This distance is greater than the dimensions of the region where a drive between Thedford in the Municipality of Lambton Shores in north Lambton County to Dresden, just south of the border between Lambton County and Chatham-Kent is roughly 90 kilometres (Kures & Deller 2022, p. 55).

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Nor is it safe to assume that commutes always involve people living in rural areas travelling to work in an urban centre. Statistics Canada has found that, on average, urban jobs employ 16% of rural workers and urban workers in turn fill about 7% of rural jobs. Commuting, therefore, tends “to be multidirectional and do not merely follow a periphery-to-core flow” (Harris, Alasia & Bollman 2008, p. 3).

Local Trends and Issues

Indeed, in the Sarnia-Lambton region, where key petrochemical industries are located in the Township of St. Clair, a largely rural municipality, and where two main sectors—education and agriculture—drive the presence of temporary residents, some indications suggest that the relationship between where a newcomer lives and works may not always be closely related. One of these involves well-established commuting behaviour in the region. Roughly one sixth of the population routinely spends more than 15 minutes commuting and a tenth spend up to 29 minutes on the road. Most of these commuters drive themselves (Statistics Canada 2023).

Another indication is the rate of growth in communities outside of Sarnia. In 2025, for instance, the Lambton Area Water Supply System predicted that the fastest growing municipalities over a 20-year period that it serves would be St. Clair Township (24.7%), the Town of PlymptonWyoming (25%) and the Township of Warwick (21.7%). Over that same period of time Sarnia (10.2%) is expected to grow at half the rate (Lambton Area Water Supply System 2025, 1-5). Petrolia is another community anticipated to grow over the next decade with its population of children aged 0 to 12 projected to grow by 20% from 2021 numbers. This growth has been attributed to the community’s appeal to young families (County of Lambton Social Services Division 2024; Wright 2024). The well-documented practice of housing temporary foreign workers that work in agriculture in adjacent urban centres further suggests that housing and workplaces are more commonly split between urban and rural locations than might be anticipated (Enano 2022).

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Transportation Infrastructure

Sarnia-Lambton's transportation infrastructure, both within its urban centre of Sarnia and throughout the county reflects how important commuting is to the region's residents—and to economic development. With respect to its highway infrastructure, the region bears a distinct advantage over regions directly to the north because of its direct access to one provincial 400series highway, two provincial highways (40 and 21), and an international border crossing. These highways and crossing are essential for connecting Sarnia with its other urban counterparts in the southwestern Ontario region and beyond. Fed by a well-developed network of county roads, these highways are also essential for inter-community commuters.

Public transportation has improved in recent years along this regional and inter-regional road network and within Sarnia itself with several types of bus routes available. However, inter-community public transit is nearly non-existent in the region's rural communities south of Hwy 402. Existing inter-community transit services to the north of the 402 and similar services in Chatham-Kent, directly south of Lambton certainly provide inspiration and the potential for expansion for addressing the public transportation challenges in this rural area. These services rely on all levels of government for support.

For those who do not have access to a vehicle or who are unable to drive distances, private alternatives do exist throughout the region, including taxi, Uber and chartered bus services and rideshare apps. Service organizations provide some transportation services to area residents with special needs, but these services may be limited to specific communities.

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