



HOUSING RESOURCES

FOR NEWCOMERS TO SARNIA-LAMBTON AN ASSET AND GAP ANALYSIS

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Overview

Migrants to the Sarnia-Lambton region will encounter many of the same challenges in securing housing as in other urban and rural locations throughout southern Ontario: an existing housing stock that has not grown apace with local demand, and the region has experienced steep increases in rental and property prices. In turn, recognizing the importance of housing to ensure a healthy, sustainable economy, local governments have responded with efforts to secure new public and private housing resources. Most of these services are delivered in English and/or French. Most of the resources do not specifically target the needs of migrants to the region, other than strategies to house international students. Nevertheless, many of these resources are useful to newcomers, and offer ideas on how to improve not only newcomers' initial experiences in settling in the region, but also their ongoing experiences.

Rental Housing and Home Ownership

According to the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) rental market survey data tables for 2024, Sarnia's total apartment and townhouse rental stock numbered 5,550 and 6,388, respectively (CMHC 2024). Lambton Shores had a stock of 148 apartments and 152 townhouses that same year. No data were given for other communities in the county, but it is reasonable to assume a slight downward trend in total rural rental stock from 2023 to 2024 as was evident in Chatham-Kent, south of Lambton County, for that time period.

Average rents in Sarnia increased more than 9% from 2023 to 2024, with the average monthly rent of a one-bedroom apartment increasing from \$1,099 to \$1,197. In Lambton Shores, rental prices dropped by nearly 12% from 2023 to 2024, with average monthly rents dropping from \$1,455 to \$1,274.

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The CMHC data tables indicate that while vacancy rates doubled in Sarnia to 4.8% in 2024 compared to the year before, they substantially declined in Lambton Shores to 0.7% from 3.3%. Of particular note are the relatively high turnover rates of rentals in 2024. These reached 13.7% in Sarnia and 7.5% in Lambton Shores.

By April of 2025, a buyers' market had begun to emerge in the region. Residential sales activity dropped slightly for March 2025 compared to the same time the year before, but the number of listings was well above that of the year before, and of the region's 10-year average, with residential new listings also well above the 10-year average. Average prices also showed a slight decline in March 2025 to just under \$500,000 compared to the month before (just under \$550,000), although it was a considerable spike in average price compared to the same month in 2024 (roughly \$225,000). The year-to-date average price of \$508,763, however, was down only 0.3% compared to the same period in 2024 (Sarnia-Lambton Association of Realtors 2024).

Jeremy Guérette, president of the Sarnia-Lambton Association of Realtors, attributed the market shifts to buyers showing reluctance to buy in the face of the Canada-U.S. trade war while sellers appear motivated to sell (Sarnia-Lambton Association of Realtors 2024). Yet vernacular and statistical accounts suggest that housing capacity is a mixed bag that differs depending on the type of housing under consideration. In November 2024, for instance, the Smart Prosperity Institute ranked Sarnia 95th out of 100 urban communities across Canada in terms of the total housing starts per 1,000 residents, indicating a shortage of mid-range housing (Moffat 2024).

The city ranked 86th in apartments produced and 84th in new builds for a five-year period from July 1, 2018 to July 2024. These statistics reflect a total of 10.7 housing starts per 1,000 residents, or, in total, 769 starts. In terms of apartments, the city had 4.7 per 1,000 people and a total of 769. The city produced six ground units—multiplexes—per 1,000 people, or a total of 433 in the same period. The Ontario government's housing supply tracker, however, indicates that 561 homes have been added in Sarnia since 2022 (Ontario 2025).

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Housing Issues

Contributors to Reddit threads have noted a solid availability of apartments for students. Two commenters observed differences in pricing for short-term housing intended to serve construction workers travelling to the city to work on plant maintenance shutdowns and other housing geared to students. "Sarnia isn't too bad for finding a room rental for college, it can look a lot worse than it is though because people see the short-term rentals that plant workers will stay in for significantly higher rates (weekly) and assume it is the same," one poster explained (BackToTheBas1cs 2025). Another poster noted that finding affordable rentals can become difficult as the school term begins (Cin_Mac 2025). Other commenters blamed a large volume of international students for reducing the capacity of rental stock in the city and pushing up rents— comments that may indicate a broader public resentment of migrants with international backgrounds (captainunicornlove 2021; Demirep77 2021). However, with anticipated enrolment of international students reduced because of federal caps on student visas, it is reasonable to assume that there will be a larger-than-normal short-to-mid-term rental capacity available in the fall of 2025 in Sarnia.

County documents indicate that there continues to be significant demand for supportive housing for those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. (Issues of homelessness may be of particular concern to immigrants and temporary residents who have been recruited for specific roles that did not work out, and for international students searching for employment.) Homeless numbers have declined between April 2024 and April 2025, although county statistics indicate there are 274 people registered on its By Names List of homelessness, of which 203 are chronically homeless. Shelters over the past year have operated at more than 90% capacity (County of Lambton Homelessness Prevention and Social Planning Department 2025).

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New Builds

Public, private, and community efforts to build capacity in various forms of housing are well underway. Several affordable housing projects are at different stages of development in Sarnia. These include a project slated for completion in 2026 that will feature 50 one-bedroom units, of which 14 are March of Dimes-supported units that will provide "scheduled and unscheduled service to people with disabilities" (March of Dimes 2024). Lambton County and Indwell Community Homes also plan to partner to develop and operate between 150 and 300 supportive housing units in the region. The projects are a part of the county's affordable strategic plan, which is also responsible for adding two new community housing units in Sarnia and the county's recent acquisition of three other properties in Sarnia to use for community housing (Aviles-Saez 2025).

Considerable private development is taking place in Sarnia and throughout the region. In January, the Village of Point Edward passed an official plan amendment that green lights a mixed-use development of low, medium, and high-rise buildings that would add 1,900 units, most of which would be apartment rentals. In Alvinston, at least two subdivisions are at different stages of development. One of these proposes developing 244 mixed-use residential units. In Lambton Shores, a development that consists of 32 single-family dwellings; a three-storey, 70-unit apartment building; and 24 townhouses is also in the pipes. A proposal in Warwick Township calls for the development of 147 units of mixed-use residential housing, and in Petrolia, a 426-home subdivision recently approved to be constructed over time will supply 332 single detached homes and 96 townhouse units. Most of these private projects are supplying "missing middle" housing (Nauta 2025; Malleum Partners 2024; Lambton Shores 2025; Warwick Township 2025; and Wright 2024).

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