

One-Industry Towns Watch Economy Pass Them By

Michael Tutton, The Canadian Press

HANTSPORT, N.S. - Glenn Rogers appreciated his small-town life in the Maritimes. But the lure of big dollars in Alberta was too strong to resist after his employer of 18 years shut down.

"I didn't really look outside the mill until I was given no choice," says Rogers, who worked as an instrument technician at the Minas Basin Pulp and Power paper mill until Friday, when it closed.

The manufacturer of recycled paper products employed 135 people in Hantsport, a town of 1,160. About 40 of them were offered jobs at CKF Inc., a local paper and foam plate maker and the mill's sister company.

Rogers, 41, is now working at the Kearl Lake oilsands project in northern Alberta earning between \$60 and \$70 per hour — double the wages of what he was offered in Nova Scotia.

"You have a family to feed," he said. "You go where you have to go and you have to do what you have to do."

The closure of the 85-year-old Minas Basin mill is the latest blow for one-industry towns that have seen the economy pass them by, adding to the westward migration of skilled workers and draining the coffers of struggling communities.

It is the third paper mill to shut down in Nova Scotia in a year.

In June, Montreal-based Resolute Forest Products (TSX:RFP) announced the closure of its paper mill formerly known as Bowater in Brooklyn, N.S., throwing 320 people out of work. That came despite a \$50-million provincial government offer to the company, \$23.75 million of which was spent to buy about 10,000 hectares of land.

The former NewPage Port Hawkesbury paper mill in Point Tupper, N.S., resumed operations in October under a new name after it was bought by Vancouver-based Pacific West Commercial Corp. The mill has roughly half the workers it once employed, and that came after a \$124.5-million assistance package from the provincial government.

The closures in Atlantic Canada aren't relegated to paper mills. Just this past Friday, High Liner Foods Inc. (TSX:HLF) shuttered a fish plant in the southern Newfoundland town of Burin, saying the facility was expensive to operate because of its isolated location and distance from the marketplace.

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About 140 people lost their jobs in the community of 2,400.

As the plants close, the small-town dream fades for many, says Arne Jensen, a former construction electrician at the Minas Basin site.

"It's unbelievable how much money can be made leaving home," he said.

The 33-year-old has also worked in the West, and said it isn't difficult for a skilled tradesperson to quickly embrace the interprovincial commuting lifestyle.

"There are a lot of guys from Liverpool and Bowater. They're out there in Alberta. That's where you have to go."

Hantsport Mayor Robbie Zwicker, an engineer at CKF, says he is determined to keep working in his town, despite its challenges.

"I don't want to become like a lot of my colleagues, doing the Alberta dream. I think it's just savage," he said.

"My province has invested good money into my health care and my education. It's a shame to turn our tax dollars over to the province of Alberta only to return to retire and further burden the local economies."

As mayor, he faces the immediate task of trying to make up for a \$270,000 drop in local tax revenue, about 10 per cent of the town budget, due to the Minas Basin mill closure.

"The small-town model in this province and probably many others may be broken and may be due for a relook," he says.

He says towns that lose their main industries such as his may need to join regional municipalities, and commuters living just outside the borders of villages and small towns may have to pay higher taxes.

He is marketing Hantsport as a good place for an information technology hub. Driving through the community, he points to the soccer field, four hectares of scenic community grounds, and grand old homes with elegant gables and ornate latticework.

"Hantsport is tied into the Annapolis Valley continuous fibre network," he says. "The Internet connectivity means you don't have to be in Toronto or Silicon Valley. It's a lower cost-of-living, and a great place to raise your kids."

However, while Zwicker remains optimistic about the town's prospects, some community leaders are also preparing for the possibility of social problems as a result of job loss and family strain.

Rev. Daniel Jamer, a Baptist minister, says community groups meet regularly in hopes of heading off social ills ranging from depression to suicide.

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"This has created a lot of pain and struggle for people," he said. "People are asking, 'Can I stay here? Must I go someplace else?'"

Jamer says becoming a community of migrant workers to Alberta isn't the solution.

"Financially it relieves pressures, but there's more to life than money. In a family relationship there are strains from that life."

Robert Younker, a 47-year-old resident of Liverpool, N.S., lost his job when the Bowater mill closed and now works on contracts that take him around the province doing environmental testing and construction work.

He says there's growing concern in the Maritimes about workers moving out of their communities and taking spending dollars with them.

"If I'm not working I'm not taking my family out to supper, I'm not travelling as much, I'm not buying fuel at the local gas station," Younker says.

He holds out hope that Liverpool will find a way to bounce back and gradually replace the paper industry jobs.

"I can't imagine going anywhere else," he says.

Liverpool has a deepwater harbour, and the Nova Scotia government recently acquired the Bowater mill's former assets, including 220,000 hectares of land it hopes can be used by the forestry industry.

Premier Darrell Dexter has also said that he believes the Port Hawkesbury mill is poised to thrive under new ownership as it focuses on glossy supercalendered paper for the magazine and catalogue market.

But skilled workers like Rogers say they're not planning to submit applications in the paper industry.

And Terry Gerhardt, the manager of operations who organized the shutdown of the Minas Basin mill, says his career in the paper industry is coming to an end.

"There's other manufacturing careers out there that I think are possible. I think Nova Scotia is losing a lot of paper experience because people have just had enough," the 47-year-old says.

"Either you're going to go out West or it's time to move on to a different manufacturing field."

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