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Embracing change without losing identity

by SIGGIA-BEASANT D



Today, there is a noticeable return of Acadian families to their ancestral homes in Nova Scotia. Rather than seeing these returnees as outsiders, Acadian communities have embraced a cultural revival. Photo: Adobe Stock

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Published in February 2025 - Page 8

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Rural municipalities across Canada have long been the heart of the country's rich heritage and diverse cultures. However, these communities are now facing an existential challenge: how to preserve their unique identities while adapting to rapid changes brought by an influx of newcomers.

The need to attract people has become a survival strategy for many small towns, yet it can create friction between the locals and new arrivals. In many rural areas, especially those experiencing economic challenges, the hope for future success often lies in attracting new residents - be they from nearby urban centres, other provinces, or even foreign countries. These newcomers bring much-needed expertise, capital, and ideas. However, they also bring change - something that can be both exciting and unsettling.

Over time, as more and more outsiders make their way into these communities, the original residents may begin to feel outnumbered. It is not uncommon for locals to feel as though they are losing their place in their own hometowns. The unique traditions and customs that once defined the community start to shift as new influences take hold. While this evolution is a natural process in any society, it can be particularly jarring in small, close-knit towns where heritage and culture are deeply rooted in the community's identity.



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Fear of Being Outnumbered

For many who have lived in a rural community their entire lives, seeing more and more outsiders take up residence can feel threatening. There is a fear that these newcomers - often well-educated and financially stable - will become the dominant force in the town. This can lead to feelings of

displacement for locals who, in some cases, have lived there for generations. It is no longer just a matter of economic revitalization. It becomes a perceived battle for the soul of the community.

One of the most common grievances is that the town no longer feels like it used to. The small, familial atmosphere becomes diluted with new faces, different accents, and unfamiliar customs. Social spaces like local markets, cafés, and churches may start to feel different as the cultural landscape changes. While some locals may adapt and embrace the change, others feel left behind.

The tension often arises from the locals' fear of losing control over the community's narrative - of being marginalized in a place they have always considered home. They might feel that the values and traditions they hold dear are at risk of being overshadowed by the new arrivals.

Consequences of Resisting Change

While it is natural to feel protective of one's heritage, resisting change and shutting out newcomers can have dire consequences. When locals reject or resent those who move into the community, it creates a hostile environment. New residents, instead of feeling welcomed, face unnecessary hurdles in integrating and contributing to the community.

In extreme cases, this can foster a divide that stifles growth and progress. This division often manifests in the form of cliques, social exclusion, or even open hostility. Unfortunately, this rejection can breed resentment not only from the newcomers, but also from the younger generation of locals.

Many young people, eager to see their hometowns thrive, may find themselves torn between staying in a stagnant community or leaving for better opportunities elsewhere. If a rural town cannot foster an environment that is open to new ideas, investments, and growth, it risks losing its most valuable asset: its youth. When the next generation leaves, the town becomes older, more insular, and ultimately more vulnerable to decline.

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The reality is that resisting change in the name of preserving heritage is counterproductive. Instead of safeguarding the community's future, it dooms it to stagnation. Heritage and culture should not be seen as fixed entities but as evolving aspects of a town's identity. The arrival of newcomers does not have to mean the loss of local traditions - it can mean the enrichment of those traditions with new perspectives and ideas.



Heritage is not something to be protected in isolation. It is something to be shared, celebrated, and enriched by new experiences. Photo: Black Ram Media Group Inc

The Return of Acadians to Nova Scotia

One poignant example of this balance between heritage and adaptation can be seen in Nova Scotia, where Acadian communities are welcoming back descendants of the original Acadian settlers. The Acadians, who were tragically expelled from their homeland during the Great Upheaval (1755-1764), are part of one of Canada's most significant cultural histories.

For years, many Acadian descendants lived in other parts of the world but, today, there is a noticeable return of Acadian families to their ancestral homes in Nova Scotia. Rather than seeing these returnees as outsiders, Acadian communities in Nova Scotia have embraced them as part of their cultural revival. They view the influx of Acadian descendants as an opportunity to strengthen their cultural roots and preserve the language, traditions, and values that define their heritage.

This influx of Acadian returnees is a prime example of how a community can welcome newcomers who complement the local culture and heritage while also contributing to the town's economic and social revitalization. By fostering a welcoming environment, these rural communities have not only strengthened their cultural bonds, but also secured a brighter future.

The expertise, businesses, and new ideas brought by returning Acadians have injected fresh energy into the community, proving that change and heritage can coexist harmoniously.

Power of a Positive Mindset

It is important to remember that many small towns do not fail because of a lack of opportunities - they fail because of a lack of willingness to embrace change. The local mindset can make all the difference. If a community sees newcomers as threats, it closes itself off to potential growth. On the other hand, if a community views newcomers as partners in revitalization, it opens the door to endless possibilities.

When new residents are welcomed, their diverse skills, experiences, and ideas can help local businesses grow, attract further investment, and even create new industries. These newcomers are often passionate about their new home and are eager to contribute to its success. But to unlock this potential, the local population must first recognize the value of these new additions. This does not mean abandoning the town's heritage. It means finding ways to integrate new perspectives while maintaining the cultural identity that makes the community unique.

Enriching Heritage Through Inclusion

The key to ensuring the long-term survival of rural communities lies in the delicate balance of preserving heritage while embracing newcomers. One way to do this is by identifying aspects of the community's heritage that can be celebrated and shared with newcomers.

For example, local festivals, traditions, and stories can be used to welcome newcomers and help them feel connected to the town's history. These shared experiences can create a sense of unity, ensuring that the town's culture remains vibrant while also evolving with new influences.

Another strategy is to actively seek out newcomers whose values and interests align with the community's heritage. This can be done through targeted marketing campaigns, highlighting the town's cultural and historical significance.

For instance, communities with a strong agricultural heritage might attract entrepreneurs interested in sustainable farming practices. Similarly, towns with a deep connection to the arts could attract artists and creatives looking for a place to nurture their work.

Local governments and community leaders play a crucial role in facilitating this integration. They can organize events that bring locals and newcomers together, create programs that celebrate the town's heritage, and foster open dialogue about the future. By focusing on inclusivity and collaboration, rural communities can ensure that their heritage remains intact while also embracing the benefits of change.

Change Is Inevitable, Stagnation Is Worse

In the end, while it is understandable to be wary of change, the reality is that stagnation is far worse. Rural communities that refuse to embrace newcomers and the opportunities they bring risk losing their vibrancy and, ultimately, their future.

As more young people leave to seek opportunities elsewhere, the town will age, businesses will close, and the community will wither. The key to preserving heritage is not to resist change but to manage it in a way that complements the town's cultural identity. By welcoming newcomers who share the community's values, and by finding ways to integrate new ideas with local traditions, rural municipalities can thrive.

Heritage is not something to be protected in isolation. It is something to be shared, celebrated, and enriched by new experiences. If rural communities can embrace this mindset, they will not only survive but prosper, ensuring that future generations continue to call these places home.

Daniela Siggia-Beasant is a communications expert and community advocate currently serving as an Economic Development Coordinator in Nova Scotia.

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