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Saskatoon alluring in Ontario

Murray Lyons, The StarPhoenix

Published: Friday, May 02, 2008

Psychologists need not e-mail me with their explanations or interpretations, but whenever I dream about the workplace or a specific neighbourhood, the dream is never set in Saskatoon, but in my hometown of Portage la Prairie. Whenever I wanted to torture my kids, I used to tell them we were going to sell out in Saskatoon and move back to Portage. As an economic move, it wouldn't be a bad idea if a person was about to retire. According to the latest MoneySense magazine survey of cities ranked on a livability scale, Portage has the fourth most affordable housing in Canada with an average price around \$99,000. Of course, affordable housing isn't everything. The little Manitoba city had its population shrink by half a percentage point in the past year. I'm surprised my hometown ranked as high as 82nd on the livability scale in Canada. High-paying jobs are hard to come by in Portage. If you're inclined to work in a french fry plant, you can sign on with either McCain's or the newer Simplot plant, but those giant potato processing plants aren't driving up wages.

GOOD THINGS HAPPENING HERE Winnipeg, the city that dominates Manitoba, is ranked seventh in

the MoneySense livability survey, although it is behind Saskatoon in family income. Winnipeg's ranking shows money doesn't account for everything. Its much more diverse manufacturing and government sector results in a stable economy with a family income average of \$66,100, significantly higher than Portage's \$54,800, even though Portage is less than an hour away. Despite dropping to 17th from 16th, Saskatoon need not panic. There are a lot of good things going on here, even though house prices have moved so quickly that household income is not keeping pace, especially for younger workers and those in the service industry. MoneySense magazine pegs the average house price for Saskatoon at \$175,000, which appears to be at least a year out of date. If the actual number -- now north of \$265,000 -- was factored in, it may have pushed our ranking down further. It's a surprise to me that Saskatoon, with a family income average of \$70,100, now ranks ahead of London, Ont., which comes in at \$68,500. It used to be a given that London was a recession-free city, what with the presence of the University of Western Ontario and the head office of Labatt Breweries and the HQ of major life insurance companies. But London's unemployment rate ranks just behind Windsor among Ontario cities. A 3M manufacturing plant in March announced layoffs for the first time in a decade. The nearby city of St. Thomas saw a thousand jobs lost at a Ford plant last year and hundreds more jobs disappeared at large truck assembly plants owned by Sterling Truck and International. With London's unemployment rate edging near seven per cent, twice Saskatoon's rate, it makes sense that the Saskatoon Regional Economic Development Authority (SREDA) will be in London next month as part of the Workwest Career Caravan. Research analyst Sean Dyck at SREDA says labour participation rates are dropping in London, a sure sign people are getting discouraged looking for work. In Saskatoon, participation rates have been continually on the rise. But if Saskatoon house prices have exceeded those in London, won't that be the big determinant in whether somebody decides to move west? Maybe not, if an earlier trip to a Workwest labour market event in Toronto is any indication.

- [1](#)
- [2](#)
- [next page](#)

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WE'RE GETTING TORONTO'S ATTENTION Bernie Ness, the labour market co-ordinator for SREDA, says professional couples who stopped by to talk to SREDA late this winter in Toronto were well aware of the growth story here. Compared to most of the Greater Toronto Area -- the GTA, as the Toronto media calls it -- nobody was deterred by Saskatoon's new housing price numbers, said Ness. The job opportunities are particularly appealing to those with engineering degrees from the Toronto area. An example: Although the community of Rocanville is a long way from Saskatoon, a woman who is a nurse and the spouse of an engineer from Toronto who will be working on the expansion of the PotashCorp Rocanville mine, was given suggestions as to where she might find work. One of the places might be Yorkton, not far from Rocanville. Yorkton was among five Saskatchewan centres in the top 50 as a best place to live in Canada. Regina, Estevan and Swift Current also made the top 50. Housing affordability, in lockstep with the need to offer competitive wages, will likely be the big determinant if Saskatoon can hold its place on the livability scale next year. Right now, it would seem people are adapting to the house-wage dilemma by commuting. As a result, we may want to adopt the term GSA,

short for Greater Saskatoon Area, as people discover housing affordability means living in a town 60 or 70 kilometres away. Again, that won't scare anyone from the GTA. mlyons@sp.canwest.com

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- [previous page](#)
- [1](#)
- [2](#)

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