

Goodbye commute time, hello free time

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Former Torontonians Jeff Malone and Kelly Baker moved to Saint John in September, trading in the grind of big-city living for quick commute times and affordable housing. PHOTO: SUBMITTED

SAINT JOHN • Lather, rinse, repeat.

That's the daily cycle Jeff Malone and his partner Kelly Baker were accustomed to when they used to call Toronto home.

Every weekday, Malone, a 35-year-old engineer, and Baker, a 35-year-old former environmental consultant, would spend hours commuting to and from their jobs. Malone's commute time alone took up three hours of his day, from his home in Toronto to his work in Vaughan and back again.

"By the time you get home, it's time for dinner and to go to bed," said Baker. "It's lather, rinse, repeat."

But the former Torontonians have ditched the routine, trading in their long commute times for easy living in the Port City.

"We're not the type of people to give Toronto a hard time," said Malone, who now works for NB Power. "We like the place, but you know it just turns out it's not where we wanted to live for the rest of our lives."

Even with a daily commute to the Point Lepreau nuclear plant, Malone has chopped his travel time down to an hour, leaving him time to explore New Brunswick.

Baker, who has landed a job at Saint John Energy, still relies on public transit, but her commute time is now mere minutes.

“Here it’s nice: You go to work, you have a good day of work because you like your job, you have an easy commute home, you enjoy your evening and you’re a happy camper,” she said.

This escape-the-rat-race story is what Saint John Mayor Don Darling is on a mission to sell across Canada in an effort to reverse the Port City’s population downward spiral.

Darling issued late last year a social media invitation to Toronto and Vancouver commuters to encourage them to ditch the rat race and move to Saint John, a city with jobs, short commute times and housing less than \$200,000.

His post attracted more than 100,000 views on Reddit and garnered national media attention. His office was also inundated with inquiries from potential new Saint Johners from around the world.

“What it told me is that we’ve got something here and this really resonates with people,” Darling said.

“There are people in their cars right now that are wanting for a different life. They’re spending an hour and a half on a train or dreaming about buying a home and they’ll never buy it, so it means we have something to sell but we just need to package it in the right way.”

A P.E.I. native, Malone said he knew little about Saint John before he and Baker, a Calgary native, decided to uproot their lives and move to the Port City last September for work.

“I had never stepped into Saint John until the day we moved here,” Malone said.

“I drove through a few times going to Maine, but (visiting Saint John) just never came up.”

But what Malone and Baker have found in the Port City is everything they’ve been looking for: Friendly people, a slower pace of life and affordable housing.

They’re now on the hunt for their very first house after years of living in a “box in the sky.”

It’s a house they’re now able to afford thanks to real estate prices in the city.

Saint John Coun. John MacKenzie has even helped with the search, Baker noted, after the couple sent him an email when they first arrived in town and he agreed to meet with them to offer house-hunting tips.

So impressed with the quality of life in Saint John, Malone and Baker say they plan to make the Port City their home for the long term.

“It’s just a good place to be,” Baker said.

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DON DARLING