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Olds-fashioned College Town

Alberta Venture Stops Over in Olds

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Destination: Olds

by Alex Frazer-Harrison

Think Prairie college towns, and images of Edmonton or Saskatoon may be the first to mind. But thanks to the more than 1,200 students enrolled at [Olds College](#), the same atmosphere exists in this town of more than 7,200, midway between Calgary and Red Deer.

“People think you come to a small town and there’s nothing to do,” says longtime business owner Joe Gustafson. “Olds is quickly putting that aside. We have theatres, the most modern high school in Alberta, and technology is permeating into the community.”

Now retired from the drugstore he ran downtown for 35 years, Gustafson chairs the technology committee at the [Olds Institute for Community and Regional Development](#). The institute is spearheading Fibre to the Premises (FTTP), a community-run, open-access communications initiative to deliver high-speed Internet to local homes and businesses – creating a model for other rural communities to follow.



Founded in 1890 along the Canadian Pacific railroad between Edmonton and Calgary, the town has always shown the same pioneering spirit now driving the FTTP.

“Our foundation is agriculture, and it’s still strong in the community,” says Gail Scott, economic development officer with the institute. “But it was the introduction of the oil service companies that created that initial growth, and Olds College has become a huge economic driver.”

Olds’ biggest employer, the college is known for the agricultural and horticultural programs for which it was established in 1913, but it has also branched into areas ranging from business administration and applied agribusiness to land and resource studies to fashion design. Dominating the east side of town, it also hosts the \$68-million Community Learning Campus, which comprises a Bell e-Learning Centre for online, distance learning, the Fine Arts and Multi Media Centre (site of the new TransCanada Theatre) and the Ralph Klein Centre, which houses provincial government offices, health and fitness facilities and Olds High School.

A fast-growing retail sector has made Olds a commercial hub thanks to the new big-box Cornerstone shopping centre offering a Walmart and other major retailers, and downtown has also seen new major businesses arrive, such as the Brick. Currently, the town's trading area encompasses nearly 45,000 people.

"All that surrounding business from the other towns that used to inevitably migrate to larger urban centres is starting to be sucked in by the gravity of Olds," says Rick Overwater, Olds Institute marketing and communications chair.

A resulting challenge is accommodations. Scott says a town priority is attracting more hotel development, including, she hopes, one with a convention centre. As well, Olds is looking to create more technological and light-industrial manufacturing job opportunities. "We're after higher-tech, clean, sustainable jobs," Scott says. "We want to keep young people in the community, so we want to attract the types of jobs they're training for."

Rural towns are always challenged to keep youth engaged. But being a college town seems to offer advantages. (No doubt, it's one of the reasons for the Town of Olds' lofty 2019 population projection of 20,000).

"People seem less in a hurry to get out of here," says Overwater, who claims to notice more young people about than what one might expect in a rural town. He may be right: almost half of Olds' population is under 40. And businesses are beginning to cater to the demographic, if the recent arrivals of a skate-and-snowboard shop and a pub featuring live music are any indication. "Towns that are positioned to nurture creative activity and have social outlets like we have are more likely to get people to stay," he says.



Population

7,248



Median Household Income

\$51,940 (2005)



Average Home Price

\$280,000



Weather

Warm summers range from 15 C to 23 C. Chinook winds occasionally take the edge off winters that dip to -25 C.



Commuter Route

Olds is at the junction of highways 2A and 27, 5 kilometres west of the QE2 corridor. Calgary is 90 kilometres south, Red Deer 63 kilometres north.



Economic Picture

Though Olds College is the town's top employer, Olds is a hub for oilfield service, light-industrial manufacturers and agribusiness. As a regional centre, it also features a fast-growing retail sector, including the Cornerstone "power centre" anchored by Walmart, another top employer. Business generation is also strong: in 2009, the town issued 754 business licences.



Under Construction

The town issued \$43.8 million in building permits in 2009. Current projects include a new public library, a Catholic elementary school, Mountain View Credit Union business complex, Mountain View Seniors' Housing and the Cornerstone Village housing development, featuring apartment-style condos and semi-detached homes.



Conversation starter

TransFair Canada, a not-for profit certification and public education organization, named Olds a designated Fair Trade Town – the first in Alberta. This means the town, local stores and restaurants embrace the idea of selling or using Fair Trade-certified goods – coffee, for example – produced under environmentally sustainable conditions by workers who are fairly paid.



Where to Eat

Chez François offers a big-city menu ranging from Philly cheese steak to beef, shrimp and spicy lamb kebabs, as well as cooking classes. Tracks Pub offers live music from some of Canada's top musicians, such as Juno-nominee Julian Austin and Calgary's Michael Bernard Fitzgerald. On weekdays, Granny Jacks, near downtown, offers bistro-style fare and specialty coffee.



Where to Sleep

A Ramada, part of the Cornerstone Village complex, is the newest addition to Olds' accommodations. There's also a Best Western at the east end of town and, north of Highway 27, the Sportsman Inn and Circle 5 motels.



Diversions

If you've got your clubs, Olds Central Highlands Golf Course offers 18 holes just east of town. Or, from June until the fall, catch Olds College Botanic Garden in all its glory (its indoor components can be visited year-round). In town, the downtown core features a heritage commercial strip. Get the full story at the Mountain View Museum, with collections to immerse visitors in the history of Olds and the surrounding region.