

ENTREPRENEUR SMALL BUSINESS VOICE

Collingwood's debut in top 10 on ranking of business friendly cities is no accident



DENISE DEVEAU | October 12, 2014 | Last Updated: Oct 20 9:43 AM ET
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Alex Yuen poses with imported Italian Fusti containing a large assortment of extra virgin olive oil from an imported Fusti at The Collingwood Olive Oil Company in Collingwood, Ont., October 9, 2014. Alex and his wife Cheryl McMenemy moved back to Collingwood from Owen Sound to open their upscale boutique in May 2014. J.P. Moczulski for National Post

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In early 2014, Alex Yuen and his wife Cheryl McMenemy decided to launch a business venture in Collingwood, Ont. The new proprietors of the Collingwood Olive Oil Company say they're glad they waited for the right moment. "Ten years ago, I wouldn't even have thought of opening a business in Collingwood. Now I can say we get a good bang for our buck here," Mr. Yuen said.

While Mr. Yuen was raised in Collingwood, he has worked in Owen Sound, Ont., for the past 13 years, and said he is amazed by what has transpired over the years he was away. "The downtown core, the new subdivisions, the commercial development — when we saw that growth, we figured it was a very vibrant community for setting up a business."

The small business community has evolved significantly in the past 10 years, said Martin Rydlo, director of marketing and business development for the Town of Collingwood. "Small business is the backbone of rural communities like ours. We've seen all kinds of sectors growing from IT and virtual businesses, to healthcare and services."

The comfortable and affordable lifestyle along with the local amenities are attracting young graduates looking to start families, professionals seeking a less stressful lifestyle, and empty nesters wanting to start up a company as a third or fourth career. "It's a great town for people to pursue their dreams, because there's strong community support and you're still within arm's reach of Toronto," Mr. Rydlo said.

One point of pride is its integrated support system for entrepreneurs. "Our approach is very unique from other municipalities and even larger cities. Typically they are scattered across areas making it more difficult for people to start and grow their own companies," he said.

Instead, the offices for the Town of Collingwood, the Business Development Centre and the South Georgian Bay Small Business Enterprise Centre are all under one roof, next door to the Chamber of Commerce and the Business Improvement Association.

Niru Somayajula, president and chief executive of SensorTech, a developer of high-tech ceramic components used in underwater sonar equipment, has been an eye witness to the city's transformation. Her father purchased the business, which was originally a division of Blue Mountain Pottery, before it closed shop in 1985.

Now, the venture has grown to the point where Ms. Somayajula felt it was time to return to the community to take the helm. The company never left the region, she said, because property is easy to find and very affordable. "More importantly, Collingwood is just an amazing place to live and it's literally a five minute commute to work. It may be hard to find talent, but the people we do find are here to stay."

Top 10 Overall scores, mid-sized cities (CMA/CA population under 150,000)

	Score: (/100)	Change From 2013
1. Lloydminster	72.4	+5.0
2. Fort McMurray	68.0	+6.0
3. Camrose	67.6	-
4. Grande Prairie	67.2	+2.2
5. Brooks	66.3	-
6. Red Deer	64.4	-2.2
7. Collingwood	64.1	-
8. Thetford Mines	63.4	3.2
9. Saint-Georges	62.5	-0.3
10. Medicine Hat	61.3	+4.1