

SHIFTING COMMUNITIES

In 2005, the City of North Bay, Ontario set in motion an initiative that to this day continues to change the face of the community. Interested in knowing what problems were facing business leaders in the community, the municipality conducted individual interviews, done one-on-one with North Bay businesses. What were business leaders saying? Labour market shortfalls were their main concern. There were just not enough people to fill the jobs. And, pending retirement rates were expected to aggravate the issue. The response? The municipality began to investigate solutions and identified immigrant attraction as a key activity. In addition to other initiatives, such as youth recruitment to local businesses, attracting immigrants became a principal focus of activity for the municipality.

North Bay is not unique in this situation. Smaller, and rural, communities all across Canada have recognized the importance of enhancing the local labour market by attracting newcomers. And, municipalities are not alone. Federal and provincial government initiatives also support these activities. The Welcoming Communities Initiative through Canada Immigration and Citizenship is but one example. Federal funding provided to the provinces through collaborative agreements also provides additional support to community organizations and municipalities. This

includes the Welcoming Inclusive Communities and Workplaces program at the BC Ministry of Regional Economic and Skills Development, and similar funding envelopes through provincial governments across the country.

Building Your Case

But, funding and goodwill initiatives are simply starting points for attracting immigrants and newcomers to smaller communities. The majority of immigrants, 75 percent, still prefer to settle primarily in the larger urban areas of Vancouver, Montreal, and Toronto. And, while by and large immigrants may be drawn to larger centres because of resources, ethnic-community connections, family ties, or seemingly better prospects for employment and opportunity, at least one study in particular has demonstrated the benefits for immigrants settling in smaller centres. A Statistics Canada report released in January 2008, *Perspectives on Labour*, provides smaller communities with some leverage and selling points to attract immigrants. The report states that, while living in larger urban areas for Canadians may generally promise higher wages, the converse is true for immigrants. Incomes for immigrants living in smaller centres were higher than those who settled in large urban centres. And, while immigrants have a lower income than most Canadians, what is most interesting is that this

gap between Canadians and immigrants tends to narrow as one travels from urban to small town and rural centres. This immigrant-advantage effect that happens for newcomers settling in smaller communities is consistent for those with official language ability, as much so as for those without language skills. "In their first year of permanent residence, their average income is four percent higher than that of a Canadian. In the 13th year, the relative income advantage of immigrants rises to 19 percent."¹

This is definitely a strong selling point for municipalities hoping to attract immigrants drawn initially to larger centres. But, there are other benefits as well. Attracting immigrants to smaller centres is usually a community-driven activity that involves a number of stakeholders. Settling in a large metropolis is generally considered the default landing. While larger urban centres can entice newcomers with resources often indigenous to the setting, smaller communities must generally take a more proactive approach. Municipal or community-driven immigrant attraction programs usually involve a number of players, each with their own interest in recruiting newcomers, but all willing to promote together. This was the case with North Bay. What began as a small working group of vested interest is now a large collaborative effort involving community organizations, schools, busi-

Angela Sasso is the Director of Shifting Pictures Inc., a consulting firm working in intercultural competence and language access. Angela has been a principal consultant and researcher for numerous projects since 1990. She can be reached at <shiftingpictures@gmail.com>.

1 Perspectives on Labour, January 2008, Statistics Canada <www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/75-001-x/2008101/article/10505-eng.htm#tphp>.

nesses, the municipality, and the local college and university. For newcomers to a community, this translates into more helping hands. More groups, individuals and service providers working together can result in a more inclusive community feeling for new community members.

However, smaller centres that are not settlement resource-rich must also consider what increased immigration can mean for their communities. The positive side is increased economic activity, increased labour markets, and a diversity of cultures and experiences; the flip-side can also mean that the challenges around integration for newcomers are demanding, and resistance to diversity may be intensified.

Shift Happens

The immigrant population has changed greatly over the last few decades, with immigrant countries of origin shifting from European to Asian countries. This shift has also meant that more immigrants speak a language other than English or French at home. Between the period from 2001 to 2006, an estimated one million newcomers arrived in Canada. Four out of five of those newcomers spoke a language other than English or French as their mother tongue. In the 2006 census, more than 200 languages were reported by Canadians. And, languages from the Middle East and Asia had the largest population increases, with languages such as Punjabi, Arabic, Urdu, Tagalog, Tamil, and the Chinese languages leading.²

But, language does not exist in isolation of culture. Along with a mix of new languages comes a mix of new cultures, new perspectives, different ways of doing and being. And, while in large urban centres, immigrants can hide within ethnic communities – or simply don't seem that different given the history of settlement in larger communities – in smaller communities these differences can become amplified. Issues of racism, cross-cultural intolerance, and community fragmentation can begin where there is a lack of proper planning and forethought. While North Bay did face minor incidents of intolerance, in the form of editorial comments and letters

to the editor in the local paper, there has been a significant turnaround with regard to how immigrants are perceived. This has involved proactive approaches on the part of the North Bay Newcomer Network, a collaborative of community stakeholders that guides the community's progression through this initiative.

Despite the immigration history of Canada, the current depth and breadth of differences experienced with the recent changes in country of origin of immigrants is historically unparalleled. Numerous communities across Canada have experienced a history of immigration, frequently for labour market needs. The current day challenges are different because of the awareness that, along with simply employing individuals, we are now committed to nurturing and establishing inclusive communities. Inclusion means belonging, in a meaningful way. How communities attract immigrants becomes a secondary point, once we realize that retaining newcomers is the more critical task. As Marla Tremblay, Economic Development Officer, City of North Bay, states, communities have to "put the cart before the horse. Retention is key."

If a community successfully recruits newcomers – given the resources that are invested in building an immigrant recruitment and attraction program – doesn't it make sense to also allocate the same level of resources to retaining those new community members? Resources must be in place before a community begins to recruit, although that doesn't negate the fact that a community will continue to evolve as the demographics shift. Recognizing that certain resources should be in place is critical. As a part of their immigrant attraction plan, North Bay began by speaking to immigrants that had already settled in their community as well as surrounding communities, and discovered that one asset for a community welcoming newcomers is to have an immigrant, or multicultural centre. With some effort, and persistence in finding funding, North Bay established the North Bay Multicultural Centre in 2008.

² *The Daily*, Tuesday, December 4, 2007, Statistics Canada.

This centre is the main dissemination point for information, collaboration, and programs for community organizations, businesses, and individuals, whether they are newcomers or long-term residents.

Next Steps

Recognizing that immigrant attraction and recruitment is vital to the economic and social growth of a community is the first step, but the ongoing work of ensuring that a community continues to progress and prosper requires continuous effort. What are the strategies for successful immigrant engagement and retention? Implementing immigrant settlement centres, such as the case in North Bay, is unquestionably a good start, but there are other community-based and business-based activities that also help maintain the momentum, as well as other strategies to support the evolution of a diverse community. The second part to this article (in the July issue) will explore more case-studies and discuss the North Bay example as a success story for retention and inclusion. MW

Although this article is intended to highlight and speak to the patterns and impact of immigration in Canadian communities, in so doing, it does not intend to negate the existence of First Nations Communities prior to the arrival of European settlers, nor the significant ongoing contributions and importance of Aboriginal peoples in the Canadian community.

HEMSON Consulting Ltd.

Municipal Finance

Development Charges
Asset Management
Tax Policy
Fees & Charges
Water & Sewer Rates
Long Range Financial Planning

Growth Management

Land Needs Assessment
Sustainability Planning
Municipal Governance
Fiscal & Economic Impact
Forecasting & Demographics

416-593-5090

www.hemson.com