

North Bay investing in immigration

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By Don Curry

North Bay is spending time and resources to attract immigrants. Some wonder why.

Trevor Wilson, a human equity expert and author of *The War for Talent* who spoke at North Bay's Diversity Day event in May, tells audiences wherever he goes that one-third of the Canadian workforce is eligible for retirement between 2006 and 2012. Three-quarters of the top managers are eligible for retirement by 2012 and half of the senior managers under them are also eligible to retire.

Many of us have heard David Foot, University of Toronto demographer and author of *Boom, Bust and Echo*, speak. I've heard him twice and it was many years ago. He talked about what was coming. Schools will close and we will be building more seniors' housing.

Look around you. The time he was talking about then is now.

The replacement rate to sustain a population is 2.1 babies per couple. Canada's rate is 1.8.

Get the picture?

North Bay Mayor Vic Fedeli says he doesn't think there was an "ah ha moment," for city council when it decided an immigration strategy was needed. But, he gives the topic great attention on his weekly blog and is a firm supporter of the North Bay Newcomer Network, the North Bay & District Multicultural Centre and all things multicultural. His business cards are available in numerous languages.

Immigration concerns in Canada have long been the domain of Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver, cities that still receive 75 per cent of the approximately 250,000 immigrants to Canada each year. But the times they are a changing.

Witness the Welcoming Communities Initiative in Ontario. It has representation from universities and settlement agencies in 15 communities across Ontario—almost everywhere except Toronto, and Toronto was left out deliberately. North Bay, Sudbury and Thunder Bay are all participating.

Meyer Burstein of the WCI project notes "the aim of the project is to create a policy-research centre that focuses on smaller cities and towns and their capacity to attract, retain and integrate minorities in a manner that promotes prosperity and sustainability."

By 2017 projections show 15 per cent of Ontario's religious minorities and 13 per cent of its visible minorities will be living in urban and rural settings outside the Greater Toronto Area.

I have lived in North Bay since 1978 and the change in the city has been noticeable in the past few years. The city is becoming more diverse. More international students at Nipissing University and Canadore College are part of the reason, but we are also getting more newcomer engineers at the international mining companies with headquarters here, more health care professionals lured by the new North Bay Regional Health Centre, more bankers, civil servants...and the list goes on.

At the North Bay & District Multicultural Centre we meet many of these people as they access our settlement services. In June we had 10 new clients in their first year in Canada and for the first three months of this fiscal year, ending June 30, we have 17 Host program matches. The target for the full year is 25.

The Host program, funded by Citizenship and Immigration Canada, matches a North Bay resident with a newcomer to accelerate the integration process by helping the newcomer network in the community, practise speaking English or French, learn where to shop for the best selection and price and many other things locals know.

Much of the immigration activity in the city is being driven by the North Bay Newcomer Network, a group now five-years-old that helped launch the North Bay & District Multicultural Centre, the North Bay immigration portal, and most recently, the North Bay Immigrant Employers' Council. Co-chaired by the City of North Bay and the multicultural centre, it has an executive committee, the employers' council, a welcoming communities committee and a settlement committee.

Three members of the NNN executive were off to Toronto to see the Queen July 6 at the Ontario Legislature. They had picked up the Newcomer Champion Award from the Ministry of Citizenship earlier and then got invited back to meet the Queen. It was the second Newcomer Champion award in North Bay, with a multicultural centre staff member winning it a year earlier.

Awards and recognition are great but they are not what inspire the folks on the ground at the multicultural centre, City Hall and NNN to lead the charge to create a welcoming community for newcomers. It has become a passion and the real rewards are seeing newcomers get jobs in their areas of expertise, buy a home, get their kids in school and become active in the community.

It's simply a continuation of what has been going on in Canada since 1867.

Don Curry is executive director of the North Bay & District Multicultural Centre, co-chair of the North Bay Newcomers Network and a member of the provincial governing council of the Welcoming Communities Initiative.