

Regional Perspectives



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Revitalizing Economies with Immigrants

Many older cities in the Northeast and Midwest that have experienced decades of population decline have latched on to a new approach to gaining population and reinvigorating their economies. These cities and their metropolitan regions are adopting various strategies aimed at attracting and retaining immigrants and refugees. While some politicians rail against immigrants and their perceived negative impacts, others, particularly at the local level, are enthusiastically promoting the economic benefits of welcoming these new arrivals to their communities.

As the movement has grown, individual cities and regions have been networking and comparing best practices surrounding efforts to attract immigrants in support of economic development. As one example, in mid-June the Global Great Lakes conference in Pittsburgh was hosted by three organizations that see value in welcoming immigrants to these shores: Global Detroit, Global Pittsburgh and Vibrant Pittsburgh.

The focus of the day-long event was not only on attracting and retaining immigrants to the various regions in support of economic growth, but also on ways to connect the immigrant groups with the existing population, especially underserved communities. The conference attracted dozens of local leaders and nationally-recognized authorities on the topic of immigrant attraction as a tool for economic and community development.

I spoke to two of the attendees of the conference. Juliana Kerr is the director of the Immigration Initiative for the Chicago Council on Global Affairs. On the day I spoke with her the Chicago Council had issued a report, “Growing the Heartland: How Immigrants Offset Population Decline and an Aging Workforce in Midwest Metropolitan Areas, as Kerr said, “a title that answers the question.”

Betsy Cohen also attended the Pittsburgh conference. Cohen heads a regional group known as the Mosaic Project. Operating out of the offices of the St. Economic Development Partnership, the Mosaic Project aims to establish St. Louis “to be a cultural mosaic because this community believes that immigrants invigorate our region, drive innovation and take us back to our roots.” The outcome of the project would be to transform the St. Louis area into one of the fastest

growing metropolitan areas, promoting “regional prosperity through immigration and innovation.”

Cohen suggested that the conference showed that “all of the heartland communities are stepping up their outreach” to immigrant communities and moving towards a more “welcoming America.”

Here at home, we have seen Baltimore City’s foreign-born population grow from 29,600 to about 46,000 since 2000. For the metropolitan area, the foreign-born population gained more than 100,000 and is now estimated at about 248,000. Still, with Baltimore City’s foreign-born population at 7.4 percent of the total and the region at about 9 percent, Baltimore is well below the national figure of more than 12 percent.

Baltimore’s mayor has made explicit that Baltimore City is a welcoming community for New Americans. This is further reflected in the newly created Mayor’s Office of Immigrant and Multicultural Affairs. The new office is a result of a recommendation from “The New Americans Task Force, The Role of Immigrants in Growing Baltimore”.

The Economic Alliance of Greater Baltimore notes the region’s growing outreach to the international community, particularly to the talent pool represented by international students at the area’s colleges and universities. The alliance’s web site notes that “Maryland is quickly becoming a popular place to settle for immigrant entrepreneurs interested in starting technology companies. About 25% of engineering and technology startups founded in Maryland between 2006 and 2012 were started by immigrant entrepreneurs.”

A report from the Partnership for a New American Economy notes that 40 percent of the firms on the Fortune 500 list had founders who were immigrants or the children of immigrants. The companies include such iconic names as Intel, Apple and eBay.

When someone casts doubt about the value of immigration to our communities and our economy remind them of this “only in America” story. Six-year old Sergey Mikhaylovich Brin came with his parents as refugees to Maryland from the former Soviet Union. After graduating from the University of Maryland where he studied computer science and mathematics, Sergey Brin along with Larry Page went on to found Google, one of the world’s most profitable Internet companies. Google now employs nearly 50,000 and Brin’s personal wealth is estimated to be \$ 30-billion.

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