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City leads way to attract immigration

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North Bay is increasingly being viewed as a collaborative model for smaller communities in Ontario because of its successes with immigrant attraction and retention.

The latest example is the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) three-city immigrant attraction and retention case study community project including North Bay, Brockville and Chatham-Kent.

North Bay is seen as the furthest advanced of the three. Results of this project will contribute to government policy aimed at encouraging immigrants to settle in communities other than Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver.

Successes to date "are not by accident. They are by design," says Mayor Vic Fedeli.

Reflecting on how the push for immigration began, he says "All you had to do was walk down Main Street in 2004 and you would quickly realize we were a homogeneous city. There was very little colour evident, which wasn't very reflective of our country.

"I'm proud to say there wasn't an 'ah-ha' moment when this council made immigration one of the priorities. It was just a natural feeling that we needed to expand our horizons. When we did our business and retention program we realized there

were huge gaps in our labour pool and we knew that immigration was one way to bring people here."

Statistics Canada points out that by 2011, only two years away, all net growth in the Canadian labour force will be through immigration, and by 2026 all growth in population will be through immigration.

The immigration file was given to Marla Tremblay of the Mayor's Office of Economic Development. She pulled together a few volunteers and formed the North Bay Newcomer Network (NNN).

"We quickly realized that before we developed an immigration attraction and retention strategy we should ask the newcomers who are here what they think," she says.

An immigration symposium was held in April 2006 at Canadore College and more than 80 people attended. They identified an immigrant settlement agency as the strongest need in the community, for both attraction and retention.

FedNor provided funding in December of 2006 to hire a researcher to study the needs and experiences of area newcomers and to give NNN a better understanding of the true number of

newcomers living in North Bay. The year-long study by Ann Welsh provided much needed information about specific settlement issues and needs of newcomers.

Armed with the study results, Tremblay arranged to have representatives from Citizenship and Immigration Canada visit North Bay to explain how settlement agencies are funded. NNN members agreed that Young People's Press, with its history of local and national anti-racism projects, was the best suited local nonprofit agency to apply for settlement funding in a special call for proposals. It did, and the North Bay and District Multicultural Centre officially opened in February 2008.

with the successes that we've seen," Tremblay says. "In the big picture three years is not a long time, especially considering the number of stakeholders and initiatives involved."

Fedeli points to the establishment of NNN, the multicultural centre, the research study and immigration and retention strategy, opening of a mosque in the city, funding to create a North Bay Immigration Portal, pan Northern Ontario immigrant attraction efforts, and North Bay recently being named as one of three cities in the demonstration project, and says "we're absolutely thrilled with the progress to date."

He sees immigration continuing as a priority after he decides to step down. "We've got a lot of sweat equity into our immigration strategy and it would be a huge step backward to let it fall from being a priority," he says.

"As the first Italian mayor, I can say that I'm proud to represent my community; a group of immigrants who came here to build the roads and the railways and stayed to build a life together. I welcome immigrants from every corner of the world to come to North Bay and discover a life of happiness and fulfilment."

Don Curry is executive director of the North Bay and District Multicultural Centre.

On the web at www.nbdmc.ca



"I'm very satisfied"

Source: MapArt

Mayor Vic Fedeli and North Bay and District Multicultural Centre board chairwoman Susan Church with Marla Tremblay of the Mayor's Office of Economic Development at the official opening of the multicultural centre in 2008.

