

THE BUFFALO NEWS

The new Hertel Avenue is showing the promise of the latest wave of immigrants

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Tommy Lombardo Jr., left, of Lombardo's Ristorante, is on Hertel Avenue with Adnan Abdulsaid's Shish Kabab Express. (Robert Kirkham/Buffalo News)

The face of Buffalo is changing in ways that will make it stronger and should be celebrated.

There are many examples, although expressed particularly well was the [article](#) by News staff reporter Mark Sommer about the wave of new immigrants that is changing Hertel Avenue's "Little Italy."

Longtime landmark restaurant Ristorante Lombardo is still going strong and drawing customers, including Mick Jagger. But as Vito Semeraro, who owns Romeo & Juliet's Bakery and Caffe, said, "Is it really Little Italy anymore? My opinion is no." He has a point.

Even though a sizable number of people who live in the area claim Italian heritage, the avenue's businesses have taken on more variety. That change is evident in the Middle Eastern businesses that have taken root in a three-block stretch between Homer Avenue and Fairchild Place. Al-Noor Grocery sits next to Romeo & Juliet's. Ristorante Lombardo faces Sahara Hookah Lounge and Baghdad Hookah and Tobacco. And there are many more examples cited by Sommer.

Immigrants have always moved this country, and especially Buffalo, forward, and still are.

The City of Buffalo and Mayor Byron W. Brown are doing their part. Earlier this year he asked the community to sign an Opportunity Pledge, to encourage businesses, organizations and residents to commit to building a culture of inclusion and equality in the city.

There is much work being done on strategies to attract and retain immigrants, nationally and regionally. In January, the Fiscal Policy Institute and Americas Society/Council of the Americas released a [report](#) that found, "Immigrants are a little more likely to own businesses than their U.S.-born counterparts, but they are a lot more likely to own Main Street businesses such as grocery stores, restaurants and barber shops."

Over the last 10 years, many Rust Belt/Great Lakes cities, counties and states have developed strategies aimed at growing their economies through attracting and retaining the foreign-born – including refugees, immigrants, international students, entrepreneurs and business owners, according to Eva Hassett, executive director of the International Institute of Buffalo, a not-for-profit organization that helps refugees and immigrants.

Hassett pointed out that many local leaders have realized that the foreign-born are a

critical component of an attractive and well-rounded workforce and “a catalyst” for start-up businesses at the neighborhood level.

They possess educational skills and credentials that are key to the success of specific industries, including science, technology, engineering and math. The Welcoming Economies Global Network is a place where localities convene and share best practices around the economic impact of immigrants.

As strategies have developed, there is a common realization that a necessary foundation for success is creating and supporting a tolerant, inclusive and accessible community, as Hassett said. It is a community that sees diversity of any kind as a positive, and helps residents find the commonalities across ethnic and religious groups. The shorthand for this kind of community is now called “welcoming.”

Welcoming America, a national organization that began in Nashville, Tenn., now comprises 70-plus communities working to foster tolerance and inclusion. There are many other welcoming programs across the country. Results are beginning to be seen. Nashville, for example, led the country in job growth in 2012 and attracted significant corporate investment and entrepreneurial start-ups.

Welcoming is a key factor in attracting immigrants who will help in the rebuilding of Buffalo.