

On immigration, Cleveland has a lack of global perspective

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Back in 2008, then-new Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter set a goal to increase his city's population by 75,000.

Like Cleveland, Philly saw its population peak in 1950 ... and then hemorrhage for decades afterward.

When he dug into the data, Nutter noticed that while his city was losing net population, it was gaining foreign-born residents, especially younger ones.

Nutter made it one of his goals to open the City of Brotherly Love to immigrants. He signed an order requiring all city departments to have a "language access" plan for helping residents who spoke limited English. He formed a task force to come up with ways to help immigrants settle into the city. And he created an immigration and multi-cultural affairs office within City Hall.

In general, the city whose fans gained infamy for booing and throwing snowballs at Santa Claus worked to warmly welcome new Americans.

The results? In 2011, Philly reported its first population growth in 60 years. In 2013, the city was up about 105,000 in total population, shattering Nutter's initial goal.

Philadelphia's efforts are hardly unique. Since 2010 alone, more than 30 cities and states have launched immigrant-welcoming initiatives. They include Detroit, Cincinnati and Dayton.

Cleveland is not one of them.

We have groups, foundations and individuals in town working hard to attract, connect and welcome immigrants — most notably Global Cleveland and its funders — but this immigrant-attraction thing requires widespread support.

That's because it isn't easy. First off, there aren't that many immigrants out

there. Only about a million green cards for legal permanent residency are issued every year.

Second, immigrants often choose a city because of family members, friends and the current immigrant community already there. In other words, immigrants bring more immigrants. Less than 4% of Cleveland's population is foreign-born, compared with about 12% in Philly (and more than 30% in Cleveland in 1920).

We have all been celebrating "New Cleveland" this summer — the RNC, LeBron, new development, downtown population growth, the Gay Games — but on immigration the "Old Cleveland" mindset seems to remain, insular and provincial.

It's not that we are anti-immigrant, it's just that luring foreign-born residents doesn't seem to be much of a priority for many of our leaders, even as our population and tax base continue to bleed.

Every spring, we let hundreds of smart, tech-savvy and entrepreneurial-minded foreign-born graduates walk off the stages at local universities ... and into buses, cars and planes bound for other cities.

These are tomorrow's employers, customers and business partners.

It's going to take a monumental full-court press to make Cleveland a popular destination for immigrants.

We'll need plans, people, policy, programs, cooperation, infrastructure and lots more.

But most important, we need the will. We need political leadership that recognizes the benefits — economic and cultural — that immigrants bring a city. They should be leaders who can quickly and bravely shout down the myths that immigrants are job-stealers or one-party voters. Leaders with the vision of Mayor Nutter who can imagine what 40,000 or 50,000 more immigrants might mean to our community and economy.

This summer has shown us all that Cleveland's secret is reaching the nation. Why not go global?