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Retaining immigrants seen as way to grow city

Local coalition joins national movement

November 24, 2014

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After World War II, Toledo was among the growing, thriving cities of the Midwest. A manufacturing hub, its population rose to nearly 400,000 by the end of the 1960s.

However, by the end of the century, as more and more businesses and signature companies left for cheaper, nonunion labor in the Sun Belt and overseas, the city lost nearly a quarter of its residents.

Now, a coalition of local government, community, and economic groups has joined the growing, national “welcoming communities” movement to lure, retain, and embrace immigrants in hopes they will help re-grow the city.

Creating a comfortable atmosphere and friendly environment that is appealing to the foreign-born, local leaders say, can result in bringing immigrants and refugees to start businesses, fix up homes, revitalize neighborhoods, and make Toledo a more diverse community.

The Lucas County commissioners last week gave their support of a city-county initiative to promote the county as a “Welcoming and Immigrant-Friendly Community.”

The Lucas County Land Bank, Toledo-Lucas County Port Authority, Toledo Board of Community Relations, Toledo Local Initiatives Support Corp., and Advocates for Basic Legal Equality are among the community partners involved in the project.

“We feel that having a diverse community is a wealthy community,” said county Commissioner Pete Gerken.

The initiative is part of Welcoming America, a national effort that focuses on promoting cooperation and friendship between native-born U.S. residents and immigrants.

The movement of establishing “welcoming communities” is growing throughout the country. Dayton, Detroit, Columbus, and Chicago are among the Midwest cities that have adopted the economic development strategy to bring and retain immigrants.

Mr. Gerken said one only needs to look to the past to understand that Toledo became a manufacturing hub because of the diverse group of immigrants who settled here.

“We are looking to the past to solve the problems of the present to make the community better for the future,” he said.

Studies have shown immigrants are more likely than their native-born neighbors to launch a business, invent devices and improve technology, and buy a house.

Also, they tend to advance beyond high school. The Migration Policy Institute found that 40 percent of immigrants in Ohio have college degrees, including 20 percent earning graduate diplomas.

Locally, more than half of the international students who attended colleges in Toledo between 2008 and 2012 were here to obtain graduate and doctoral degrees.

Foreign-born students contributed more than \$94 million to the local economy in tuition and living costs. The educated students are an untapped resource, Mr. Gerken said.

“That really got me excited,” he said. “We were not keeping these students. They were getting an education and leaving.”

Grant funds obtained by the county were used to employ AmeriCorp volunteers to engage in the local community about the program. Community forums were held at the Sofia Quintero Arts and Cultural Center and the East Toledo Family Center.

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