

La Prensa

Linda Alvarado: “We welcome immigrants, refugees!”

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By Kevin Milliken, *La Prensa* Correspondent

Toledo-Lucas County officials are in the process of developing a strategy to make Northwest Ohio a more welcoming community for immigrants and refugees, much like Michigan and other Ohio and Wolverine cities have done over the past several years.

So they invited a former Michigan state legislator, now the executive director of *Global Detroit*, to lead a community conversation on Tuesday, March 4, 2014, 3 p.m., at *Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Cathedral*, 740 N. Superior St.



“We are bringing this guest speaker in because they are doing what we would like to do,” said *Linda Alvarado*, acting director of Toledo’s *Board of Community Relations*. “The ‘*Toledo Concept*’ is sort of like a ‘*Welcome Dayton*’. Other communities have one. *Detroit* has one.”

Like *Richard Herman* of Cleveland, *Steve Tobocman*, another attorney, is recognized as a national expert on immigration and economic development initiatives. Tobocman, 43, heads *Global Detroit*, a regional economic development strategy that looks at immigrants and internationals as a means of revitalizing metro Detroit’s economy.

Global Detroit’s efforts recently spurred *Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder* to announce an initiative to attract at least 50,000 new immigrants to the Motor City over the next five years.

“We want to bring people together to tell us how to unfold the whole idea of how we make Toledo a more welcoming community for immigrants and refugees. That’s important for us to bring all the people together, because we need to learn from them on how to put that out there,” said Ms. Alvarado.

Michigan already is starting to see results from such efforts. According to the US Census, while it was the only state in the U.S. to see an overall population drop between 2000 and 2010, the number of foreign-born residents actually increased. According to 2010 census figures, immigrants only made up **5.3 percent** of Michigan’s foreign-born population, but represented **10.4 percent** of all **business owners** that year. Michigan also ranks **11th in the U.S.** for its share

of foreign-born population with a bachelor's degree or more.

Immigrants bring diversity

“We want to become part of this movement that is happening everywhere else but here—bringing refugees and immigrants here who can actually provide economic means,” said Ms. Alvarado. “Most of them end up opening up businesses. *They’re bringing diversity.* They’re bringing foods, possibly different religions and languages. They’re adding culture to our city that, in one aspect, we might not have.” Northwest Ohio soon will see an infusion of 30 *Iraqi refugees* as its first group, but the city is seeking other groups from other countries as well.



City and county leaders intend to carefully market the concept to the public to gain acceptance—especially with some of the vitriolic political rhetoric over *immigration reform* that has occurred in recent years in different parts of the country.

“We don’t want a backlash amongst our own people,” Alvarado explained. “We’re bringing someone in to show us how to do this community-wide. How do we get churches on board, because the immigrants and refugees will want to go [practice their faith]. How do we bring along the educators, because many of them will be bringing children with them. We have to bring educators to the table and help them with diverse populations.”

“*Toledo’s story is the story of immigration*, whether from Europe, the Mediterranean, Central and South America, the Middle East, Asia or Appalachia and the South, immigrants have helped build Toledo, its economy, culture and neighborhoods,” wrote Lucas County Commissioner *Pete Gerken* in an email invitation to community leaders.

The federal government is sponsoring the expatriation of political refugees from other countries and helping them to settle state-side. Toledo has an ongoing partnership with *U.S. Together*. So far, three of the 30 Iraqi refugees have been successfully placed in the metro Toledo area.

“The refugees and immigrants are only placed if there’s already a family member here or a friend here,” explained Ms. Alvarado. “If they don’t have one in Columbus or Cleveland or Dayton—then that’s where they get placed. *U.S. Together* is a clearinghouse for that.”

The *Board of Community Relations* director stated that the agency already has an office established in *Cleveland*, but plans to add one in Toledo as well. There will be a heavy demand for “wraparound” services to help them assimilate to life in Northwest Ohio.

“They will need to get connected to a variety of services, one of the other reasons that we need the community involved,” said Ms. Alvarado. “They may need day care, or schools, or they may be going back to college. That’s all important to them. We’ve tried to make sure that when they do come, they’re put into an area where they’ll be able to find a grocery store that can service their needs, where there are bilingual services accessible for the language that they speak, or a nearby bus route.”

The Board of Community Relations director stated the community conversation is the first step to introducing the concept to residents as well. She stated the desire among public officials is for the discussion to happen “in a healthy way.”

“First of all, we all have to remember that we first came here as immigrants,” pointed out Ms. Alvarado. “We all came here for the same reasons as the populations currently trying to come here—for *economic reasons, for a better life*. We all come here with the dreams of a good life. We’re hoping we don’t get a backlash on this. That’s why we’re bringing people to the table now and unveil this to the whole community. We also want to do a marketing campaign so this all comes out sensitively.”

“Your involvement, feedback, and advice are critical to our efforts as we explore developing this initiative for our community,” said Commissioner Gerken in the emailed invitation. “Please come with questions, ideas, concerns and advice—or just come to listen and learn.”

Ms. Alvarado explained that political refugees “already are coming from trauma” in their native countries, many of them nations that “are unstable in war.” She pointed out that the refugees “are looking for safety, looking for peace, to have something better than the place they are leaving.”

“They’re refugees for a reason. They’re not coming because they want to take somebody’s job or because they want to take over the city,” said Ms. Alvarado. “They’re coming because there is no other means for them. It’s either Toledo or Chicago or New York or Cleveland. It could be any other place. *They chose Toledo.*”

Columbus is establishing a Somalian population

In a recent era of shrinking population, the effort may be a way for Northwest Ohio to sustain or even grow its regional numbers. *Columbus* recently has had great success with establishing a *Somalian* population. Organizers advocate such efforts as economic development.

Likewise, *St. Louis* has been successful in attracting refugees from war-torn Bosnia; as *Dearborn, Michigan* has been successful in attracting Muslims.



Steve Tobocman, Pete Ujvagi, Mike Brea, Seaton

“They’ve been able to do almost a whole enclave,” said Ms. Alvarado. “They have a whole corridor of immigrants who have moved there. They’re getting more because now they have grocery stores and hair places and clothing stores. They’ve been able to almost establish a whole community. Many other cities have done very well at it.”

The Board of Community Relations director called the *Iraqi repatriation effort* a good fit for Toledo, because of its large, well-established Middle Eastern population—both Islamic and Christian—second in many respects only to Dearborn.

Mr. Tobocman's efforts in metro Detroit are receiving heavy support from the Latino community there. He once represented southwestern Detroit in the Michigan legislature in an immigrant-heavy district. Detroit councilwoman *Raquel Castañeda-López*, the city's first Latina councilwoman whose district has a substantial immigrant and Latino population, is working with other public officials to create an office of immigration to support immigrants who move to the city and their entrepreneurial efforts.

The *IDEAL Group*, a southwest Detroit-based group of eight companies that employ 500 people, hosted a press conference last January where Michigan's governor announced the immigration initiative. The IDEAL Group was founded by *Frank Venegas Jr.*, the grandson of Mexican immigrants.