



## Conference held on immigrant-related economic development initiatives

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*SHOOTING FOR VIBRANCE—Vibrant Pittsburgh CEO, Melanie Harrington encourages and supports diverse communities and workforces.*

Immigration, defined as the action of coming to live permanently in a foreign country has been a part of America since the 1600s. And according to Allegheny County Executive Rich Fitzgerald and Mayor Bill Peduto immigration has played a major role in the development of the Allegheny County and Pittsburgh region.

“This city was built on the shoulders of immigrants as well as other rust belt cities like Buffalo, Cleveland and Detroit,” Peduto said.

The stance of the region’s leaders is that it is necessary for Allegheny County and Pittsburgh to be welcoming to all. The future is about bringing people to the area to succeed, they said. In Fitzgerald’s opinion everyone’s talent is compulsory to move the region forward.



***YES IN OUR BACKYARDS***— Allegheny County Executive Rich Fitzgerald and Mayor Bill Peduto address participants during the Global Great Lakes Network conference. (Photos by Diane I Daniels)

“It should be the mind set of all entities to work together,” he indicated pointing out that it takes the unity of government, corporations, civic organizations and the community.

The fact that more than 200 people gathered in Pittsburgh to address the issue of attracting and retaining immigrants to their perspective regions, to achieve economic growth, and to discuss ways to connect them with the existing population, especially underserved communities, was pleasing to Melanie Harrington, CEO of Vibrant Pittsburgh.

The group was one of two hosts and organizers of the Global Great Lakes Conference held here last week. She indicated that she was encouraged by the welcome remarks and discussion between the County Executive and Mayor as well as the many panel discussions and plenary sessions throughout the day of events. “It is important to have conversations about diversity and to build alliances and collaborations. And it is essential that the Black and immigrants communities begin engaging,” she said.

“It is exciting to be hosting this event in Pittsburgh,” said Thomas Buell Jr., Director of Marketing and the Study Pittsburgh Initiative at GlobalPittsburgh, co-host of the conference. This event allowed participants to share best practices in this field, and also to map out future strategies for making sure everyone in our cities benefits from the positive impact of international newcomers.”

Aiming to build on the success of the initial Global Great Lakes Conference that convened in Detroit last year, Buell said the desire of the 2014 conference was to provide an opportunity for Pittsburgh once again to showcase its economic transformation and revitalization, and to highlight the numerous efforts to attract immigrants to the region and to engage them once they arrive.

Participants consisting of regional leaders and nationally-recognized authorities representing cities and organizations in the upper Midwest and Northeast regions dealt with conference topics that included; African-America Communities and Immigration-New Perspectives, Engaging Ethnic Media in Your Home Market, Skilled Immigrant Integration: Promising Practices and Effective Implementation, Global Great Lakes Network and Federal Immigration Reform, Strategies and Tactics to Build an African-

American and Immigrant Alliance, International Student Retention, Micro-Enterprise Program in the Heartland, Midwest Consortium on Immigration Research, Origin Stories—How to Start a Local Economic Development Effort, Corporate Engagement, and Changing Community Perspectives—the Story of Nashville.

A Nigerian born immigrant living in the United States since the age of 14, Tolu Olunmi, the executive director of the non-profit group, Welcome.us has a strong belief that there is a huge economic benefit to this country if we find unity and ways to align. “We are a nation fueled by immigrants from around the world, who have all been united by the common cause of building a better life for ourselves and families,” she said.

Olunmi and her session partners Darrin M. Redus, president and CEO of MainStreet Advisors and Christina Greer, PhD, professor of Political Science at Fordham University concur that it is imperative to build strong bridges and to enlighten one another. An important factor brought out in the Strategies and Tactics to Build an African-American and Immigrant Alliance session was that not all Blacks are the same. “We vary in class, religion and we were not all slaves,” pointed out Greer noting that there are Black-Americans, African-Americans and Caribbean-Americans in the U.S.

Toting the theme, “Promoting immigration as an economic development opportunity” the conference was convened by the Global Great Lakes Network. The group membership describes its self as a regional economic and community development initiative and their supporters that seek to create economic growth, job creation and prosperity by attracting, retaining and empowering immigrants. Its mission is to engage in activities that strengthen the work, maximize the impact, and sustain the efforts of its individual regional members. The network is comprised of 21 organizations including GlobalPittsburgh and Vibrant Pittsburgh.

For the past 55 years, GlobalPittsburgh has been bringing together globally-minded people in the Pittsburgh region through membership activities and hosting programs. As a non-profit organization it helps universities and English Language programs attract international students, and coordinate visits for international delegations through the U.S. Department of State. It has a network of over 500 members, volunteers, and citizen diplomats who ensure that visiting leaders’ and students’ time in the Greater Pittsburgh region provides value to all members of the community. As a charter member of the Washington, DC-based Global Ties U.S. (formerly NCIV) GlobalPittsburgh is the State Department’s designated regional service provider for the International Visitor Leadership Program and other government-sponsored international exchange programs.

The mission of Vibrant Pittsburgh is to embrace inclusion, ensure the Pittsburgh region’s growth by attracting, retaining and elevating a diversity of talent and promote the region nationally and internationally as a diverse, welcoming region of opportunities. The group believes that a diverse workforce is essential to the ongoing economic vitality of the Greater Pittsburgh region and that attracting, retaining, elevating and educating people of all backgrounds, and colors including New Americans, and creating an environment that is inclusive and welcoming is a must.

Pleased with the outcomes of the conference and encouraging participants to continue dialoging and striving to make their cities diverse and to bring in a talented workforce, both Harrington and Buell suggest that locally people visit their websites at <http://www.vibrantpittsburgh.org> and <http://www.globalpittsburgh.org>. to get involved.