

Pittsburgh officials put out welcome sign for immigrants

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By Mark Roth / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

As leaders from several Midwestern cities gathered here Thursday to explore how they can become more attractive to foreign immigrants, two things became clear.

Most of the cities attending the Global Great Lakes conference were eager to boost the number of immigrants in their regions.

And nearly all of them are just getting started.

Pittsburgh is one of the newest entries in the globalization derby.

The Allegheny County and city governments have both declared themselves as “welcoming” to immigrants, and on Thursday, state Sen. Jim Ferlo, D-Highland Park, introduced legislation to set up an Office of New Americans in the state’s Department of Community and Economic Development. Two nonprofits, Global Pittsburgh and Vibrant Pittsburgh, also work to make the city an inviting destination for foreign-born people.

But there are few structured government programs to recruit immigrants as residents or employees, and a similar picture emerged in reports from other cities.

In St. Louis, the Mosaic Project has launched several initiatives to boost immigration. In one, it has worked to add international students to the list of those being mentored by CEOs and vice-presidents of local corporations. This year, 14 of 120 mentored students are foreign-born, said Betsy Cohen, Mosaic project director, and the group hopes to double the number next year.

In Toledo, Ohio, a fledgling program is marketing abandoned and tax-delinquent properties that the city has taken over to immigrants, in hopes they will buy and renovate them as homes and businesses in declining neighborhoods, said Cindy Geronimo, vice president of the Lucas County Land Bank. So far, three immigrant families have purchased properties, she said.

And in Michigan, Gov. Rick Snyder has pushed an ambitious proposal to win 50,000 visas for skilled foreign workers in the economically ailing state.

Karen Phillippi, deputy director of the Michigan Office for New Americans, said the White House has not responded to Mr. Snyder’s request yet, but given the fact that he is a Republican, “we take that as an encouraging sign.”

It was the second annual gathering of the Global Great Lakes group, which is

characterized by cities that boomed in the immigrant influx of the late 1800s and early 1900s, but have drawn relatively few immigrants since then.

Many see immigrants as a way not just to improve their economies, but to bring youth and energy to their regions as existing residents rapidly age.

In Michigan alone, more than a quarter of all physicians are now over 65, Ms. Phillippi said, and nearly 25 percent of the population will be in that bracket by 2040.

Steve Tobocman, director of Global Detroit and one of the conference organizers, said the group envisions “a revitalized Rust Belt that embraces all people who embrace the American dream.”

Sunil Wadhvani, who founded his global technology company, iGate, in Pittsburgh, told the conference participants Thursday that Pittsburgh is behind many other regions, with just 3 percent of its population born in other countries, but is in a good position to attack that issue.

“I see good early stages of change,” Mr. Wadhvani said. “Corporate and civic leaders are behind this; foundations are very supportive. It’s early days, but I’m very hopeful.”

One area all the cities hoped to do a better job with is retaining talented international students who graduate from their universities.

One way to do that, said Neil Ruiz, a senior policy analyst at the Brookings Institution, is to find out where foreign students come from and place them with companies that can do business with their home cities.

In a study due to be published this summer, Mr. Ruiz has analyzed the international student population in dozens of metro areas in the United States. Pittsburgh, for example, has 13,326 international students, primarily at Carnegie Mellon University and the University of Pittsburgh, and nearly 60 percent of them are majoring in science, engineering or technology fields. The top five cities of origin: Beijing, Seoul, Mumbai, Shanghai and Singapore.