

THE BLADE

One of America's Great Newspapers

Welcome to Lucas County

Attracting immigrants could stabilize Lucas County's population, and spark economic growth and renewal

April 2, 2015



Gerken

The U.S. Census Bureau's latest estimates suggest that Lucas County's population decline has slowed, although the county continued to lose residents last year. One good way to help stem a further population slide would be to encourage productive, entrepreneurial immigrants to move here; county officials deserve credit for promoting an initiative to do that.

Lucas County lost about 1,500 residents last year, reducing its population to 435,286 residents, according to Census data. The loss is nominal compared with previous years; the county has lost about 50,000 residents since its population peaked in 1970.

The reasons for the long-term decline are numerous: a brain drain of high school and college graduates who want to pursue better job opportunities elsewhere, an eroded manufacturing base, shortsighted public policies that encourage sprawl and discourage mass transit, daunting crime statistics, and concerns about local schools.

Lucas County officials recognize that opening the door to immigrants could provide a catalyst for economic growth and renewal, and a potential population boost. The new Welcome Toledo-Lucas County Initiative aims to increase the local immigrant population through work-force development, retention of talented college graduates, entrepreneurship, home ownership, and language immersion programs.

County Commissioner Pete Gerken told The Blade's editorial board this week that the region must re-establish its rich history of attracting immigrants who came here to live and work.

"This county and this city, as great as it is, was founded by immigrants," Mr. Gerken said. "It's time to adopt the same model — it works."

Toledo and Lucas County join other Rust Belt communities, including Dayton, Cleveland, Detroit, Pittsburgh, and St. Louis, in embracing the concept of increasing immigrant populations in an effort to expand economic development. Encouraging foreign-born entrepreneurs to invest here — buying property, starting job-creating businesses, becoming neighborhood activists — builds on existing regional growth strategies.

Steve Tobocman, director of Global Detroit, leads a similar effort in the Motor City. Finding ways to engage immigrants is particularly important in cities that struggle with post-industrial

economies and efforts to make the transition to knowledge-based commerce, such as engineering and medicine, he said.

Lucas County commissioners also are working with established national organizations that link immigration to strong local economies. It starts with creating a welcoming environment, including basics such as language access. When immigrants want to move here, there should be resources to help them.

The region, state, and country need to begin looking at immigrants as assets instead of threats. Lucas County's program seeks to create policies that would support undocumented individuals who wish to pursue citizenship, employment, entrepreneurship, and home ownership through the county's land bank.

Although Lucas County is just getting started, it's heartening to see officials taking creative and thoughtful actions to stabilize the region's economy. Declaring the county as welcoming to immigrants is the first step in ensuring that northwest Ohio is an inviting destination for foreign-born individuals and families.