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GUEST COLUMN

Immigrants can revitalize Toledo's community, economy Few other economic strategies can do so much for so little cost

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A new economic development movement is growing rapidly in the Rust Belt. It aims to make our region the center of innovation and entrepreneurship — similar to the spirit that powered our 20th century industrial superiority — and to revitalize distressed urban neighborhoods in older legacy cities such as Toledo.

This movement focuses on a core element of the economic environment that gave rise to auto, steel, and other manufacturing pioneers, as well as the work force that turned their dreams into industrial products. It works to tap the talents of immigrants who provide important opportunities for Toledo's greatest economic challenges.

A century ago, nearly 20 percent of Toledoans were foreign-born. Today that number has fallen sharply.

Immigrants and refugees potentially include talented STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) workers, entrepreneurs who can launch businesses in high-growth areas of the economy, new residents of shrinking Toledo neighborhoods who will buy vacant homes and start retail businesses, and new workers who can revive a rapidly aging work force.

A resurgence of Toledo's international population can be the foundation for a high-growth urban and regional strategy that will raise wages and provide jobs for everyone — including U.S.-born residents from across the spectrum. Toledo would be in good company in recognizing and pursuing immigration as a cornerstone of its economic development efforts.



More than a dozen Rust Belt cities that face many, if not all, of the same challenges as Toledo have launched ambitious immigrant economic development initiatives in the past five years. Global Detroit, Global Cleveland, Welcome Dayton, Vibrant Pittsburgh, the Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians in Philadelphia, and St. Louis Mosaic are just a few of these.

Last month these groups joined Welcome Toledo-Lucas County — an initiative of the Board of County Commissioners — to launch the Welcoming Economies (WE) Global Network. Our aims are to highlight best practices in immigrant economic development and to help develop and execute these strategies.

WE Global believes that immigrants are central to expanding economic opportunity and

revitalizing our region. By welcoming immigrants into the economic and social fabric of the community, we can make the Rust Belt more vibrant for everyone.

Local members of WE Global are blazing new trails in aligning their economic development programs with immigration. Global Detroit provided the impetus for launching the nation's first international student retention program.

Other elements include attracting national leaders in skilled-immigrant integration; developing ambitious micro-enterprise training, lending, and support for Detroiters; building a connector program to help international professionals build local networks; starting an award-winning national effort to welcome immigrants, and building the first searchable online database of integration services.

These programs are largely embedded in, and supported by, the Detroit region's leading institutions. They also enjoy broad support from the area's political leaders.

WE Global has found that the most important programs include a broad spectrum of stakeholders at the table: local economic development and business leaders, immigrant and refugee communities, organized labor, local government, and the African-American and Latino/ Latina communities. These innovative and effective programs focus explicitly on benefits for and effects on nonimmigrant stakeholders, as well as the challenges and opportunities that face immigrants and refugees.

Over the past two years, I have had the pleasure of working with Lucas County Commissioners Pete Gerken, Tina Skeldon Wozniak, and Carol Contrada, and the Welcome Toledo-Lucas County initiative to begin to develop similar strategies and programs in Toledo.

These programs need to be tailored to the needs, opportunities, and challenges of the Toledo region.

They need to have specific benefits for African-Americans, laid-off workers, and struggling homeowners. They also must ensure that immigrants and refugees will find Toledo a great place to call home.

Few if any other economic strategies can do so much for so little cost. The Rust Belt built the best middle-class quality of life ever known. We enjoyed the fruits of that innovation, industriousness, and entrepreneurship for the better part of a century.

The 21st century offers new challenges and new promise. Immigrant economic development is uniquely suited to Toledo and the Rust Belt to aid in our prosperity.

Steve Tobocman is founder and director of Global Detroit and founder and co-leader of WE Global Network.