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Push on to attract immigrants

But report says cities need more money to ease difficult transition

NICOLE MACINTYRE
The Hamilton Spectator

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The city is poised to launch an immigration strategy that it hopes will attract more skilled newcomers to Hamilton.

A roundtable of community leaders is forming to help guide the initiative, meant to make the city more competitive.

"We want Hamilton to be a community that immigrants want to be a part of," said Jane Soldera, director of social development and early childhood services.



Barry Gray, the Hamilton Spectator

The need for the strategy was reaffirmed yesterday by a report from the Federation of Canadian Municipalities showing new immigrants are continuing to struggle.

Though often highly educated, newcomers face higher rates of unemployment or underemployment. The report, based on Statistics Canada data, also found immigrants were more likely to be below the low-income cutoff and dependent on rental housing.

Federation president Jean Perrault said the situation has also left municipalities struggling to meet the demands of newcomers.

Cities need more money for programs and a seat at federal table to discuss the country's immigration strategy, he said.

"Municipalities need to be viewed as partners."

The federation's report highlighted the secondary migration of immigrants away from major centres such as Toronto and Vancouver. Young, educated workers are the most likely to move to communities where they see social connections, job opportunities, access to public services, a better quality of life and welcoming environment.

Though Hamilton is picking up some of the migrating newcomers, far more go to communities such as Waterloo, Halton and Niagara.

Ines Rios, executive director of St. Joseph's Immigrant Women's Centre, suspects immigrants are attracted to Hamilton for its affordable housing and ease of transportation, but are driven off by a lack of jobs. She advises clients to look beyond the city's borders to smaller communities for work -- an approach that appears to be paying off for many immigrants.

New arrivals who move away from major cities are more likely to own their own homes and receive higher pay, the report found.

Last year, the federal government offered municipalities funding for immigration initiatives. Hamilton applied to create an Immigration Partnership Council.

The proposal, developed with local agencies, was positively received but is still awaiting approval, said Soldera, who expects word any day.

The council, modelled on the Poverty Roundtable and Jobs Prosperity Collaborative, will create the immigration strategy.

Though encouraged by the initiative, Rios fears the economic downturn will make it even more difficult for Hamilton to attract skilled immigrants. She believes the city would be wise to market itself as an educational hub.

Even in a recession, Madina Wasuge, executive director of the Hamilton Centre for Civic Inclusion and co-convenor of the

council, believes Hamilton must push ahead with its strategy. Waiting, she warns, could mean being left behind.

"We're competing with cities that embarked on strategies a long time ago."

Without immigrants, Hamilton's population would be decreasing. The aging workforce makes it clear this city must attract new workers, said Councillor Brian McHattie.

"We're in deep trouble as a community if we're unable to attract new immigrants."

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