

The Chatham Daily News

Opening doors to C-K; municipality eyeing new immigrants to boost population

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Chatham-Kent is looking to increase its stagnant population at a time when birth rates have been on the decline for years.



Hassan Elkhodr stands in his convenience store, the Speed-D-Mart, on the corner of Bloomfield Road and Queen's Line. His journey to Chatham-Kent began almost 20 years ago.

DIANA MARTIN PHOTO

The 108,177 people living in the community, according to the 2006 census, represents less than a one per cent increase from the 107,341 folks living here in 2001.

Since cloning human beings is not allowed in Canada, one of the few options left for attracting new people to the community is immigration.

The Cultural Coalition of Chatham-Kent is aiming to make the community a secondary location for immigrants, said program manager Teresa Fysh.

She said Chatham-Kent doesn't have the resources that are available in Toronto, Montreal or Vancouver - main entry points for newcomers, particularly refugees - to help immigrants adapt to Canadian life.

"But once they're established, we want to attract them to move to Chatham-Kent," Fysh said.

According to recent census data from Statistics Canada, approximately 735 newcomers moved to Chatham-Kent between 2001-2006, bringing the total number of immigrants living here to 10,805.

Demographic experts predict Canada's population growth will be almost entirely dependent on immigration by 2030 and communities that don't attract immigration could see steady declines in population.

While established immigrants are who Chatham-Kent is likely to attract, cultural coalition president Maureen Geddes said, "at this point, personally, I'm not too fussy."

She added, "I'm quite open for us to bring in whatever skills and talents are needed for us to thrive together as a total community." Geddes believes Canada is in a transition period where it needs to learn to build a sustainable economic system that doesn't rely so much on growth in population.

However, she said, "we're going to need a steady stream of newcomers just to maintain our communities."

There are many roads immigrants travel to reach Canada and, specifically, Chatham-Kent.

Hassan Elkhodr, 44, has operated a gas bar and convenience store at the corner of Bloomfield Road and Queen's Line for nearly 12 years. His journey to this community began in August 1988, while he was studying electrical engineering in Boston on a scholarship from his native country of Lebanon.

Elkhodr said he and more than 300 fellow Lebanese didn't want to return to the dictatorial rule in their country, so they decided to seek refugee status. A lawyer recommended they go to Canada, because it is a large country that needs people.

Since receiving their refugee status, he said, "we are now scattered all over the country."

When Elkhodr came to Canada he lived in Toronto before moving to Brockville then to Kingston. He moved back to Toronto, then to Dutton before settling in Chatham in 1996.

A sign his roots are firmly planted in Chatham can be seen by the number of people who said hello to Elkhodr while he was being interviewed by The Chatham Daily News in a local Tim Hortons.

He also proudly talks about his children - Zeid, 11, and Adel, 9, who attend Ecole St. Catharines in Pain Court - who he and his wife, Samar, had after moving to Chatham.

"I love that they have grown up in this kind of community rather than a big city," he said.

But having lived in the community for more than a decade, Elkhodr is concerned about Chatham-Kent's low population growth.

"We can benefit from immigration," he said. "This is a very, very important issue."

He believes immigration can not only attract doctors, which the community is in dire need of, it can also bring people with a wide range of skills.

Fysh said there are government programs available to encourage immigration such as allowing businesses to recruit immigrants who are skilled workers or professionals. An entrepreneur willing to invest in a business can also be allowed into Canada as an immigrant, she added.

Fysh said Chatham-Kent's lower cost of operating can be attractive to immigrants looking to establish a business.

"We need the people and we need the jobs," she said. "These are the types of newcomers we're looking to attract to Chatham-Kent."

The benefit to the community, Fysh said, is this new investment creates jobs and increases Chatham-Kent's property tax base.

She said if Chatham-Kent doesn't attract more residents, the reality is the tax burden will be carried by fewer people. If the tax load becomes too burdensome it could also result in a decline in services, she added.

The federal government announced in late October that Canada expects to attract approximately 265,000 immigrants by September 2008.

Chatham-Kent council has set a goal to attract 1,000 net new immigrants over the current four-year term as part of its strategic planning direction to diversify and grow the municipality's population, said Dalila Prizio, business development co-ordinator with economic development services.

Working on attracting immigration is uncharted ground for the economic development department, Prizio said.

This is a new piece that we are looking at and trying to figure out a fit for it," she said.

But she added, "the necessity is there . . . and the municipality, as a whole, has recognized that."

Stressing that no money has been committed, Prizio said during upcoming budget deliberations for the 2008 year, council will be asked to consider hiring a person whose role will be to help attract immigration.

She noted surrounding communities such as London and Sarnia have people in this type of position. If approved, she anticipates the municipality will look to its neighbouring communities for advice on what duties the person in this job would be required to perform.

While there are clear financial benefits to immigration, Elkhodr has an interesting view of the intangible benefits for a community. He believes the variety of people that immigration can bring to a community is a gift.

"Every (cultural) group has something special," he said. "No group has all the best qualities and no other group has just bad qualities."

He believes having cultural diversity makes any community richer.

"Life is a big university," Elkhodr said. "Every time you meet somebody you learn something, even if you don't realize it at first."

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