

Tapping into immigration

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The challenge of increasing the number of immigrants settling in rural Ontario was explored Thursday at a workshop that effectively launched a provincial pilot program in Chatham-Kent.

The municipality is one of two mostly rural communities that will operate a CIRRO (Community Immigration Retention in Rural Ontario) program over the next 18 months.

CIRRO is designed to generate and document the best practices of small communities that are welcoming to immigrants. The government hopes to leverage the experience here and in Brockville to help increase rural immigration elsewhere in the province.

Teresa Fysh, the executive director of the Cultural Coalition of Chatham-Kent, noted that the municipality hasn't been as successful as other communities in southwestern Ontario in attracting and retaining immigrants.

In the five-county region, Chatham-Kent attracted the fewest number of immigrants between 2001 and 2006, when expressed as a percentage of the municipality's population.

The municipality's failure to attract as many immigrants meant that its overall population growth was miniscule — just 0.8 per cent over the same five years, she said.

The workshop, which attracted approximately 60 people to the Retro Suites Hotel, heard that immigrants are necessary if Canada's rural communities are to grow and prosper.

Magdy EIDakiky, a community economic development officer with the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food, said studies have shown that by 2011 any net growth in Canada's labour force will occur because of immigration.

As well, all of Canada's population growth by 2026 will come from immigration.

Those who attended the workshop received some encouragement from Dr. Ather Akbari, an economics professor from Saint Mary's University in Halifax, who spoke about immigration and economic development in Atlantic Canada, particularly in Nova Scotia.

"We seeing the same movement of people from rural communities to the larger cities," Akbari said. "But one way to fight that has been to attract and retain more immigrants."

He pointed to Colchester County, near Halifax. With a population of just 50,000, Colchester has been able to keep a larger percentage of its new immigrant population, and that's meant more economic activity and a lower unemployment rate.

"Newcomers to your community come for jobs, and when they come, they need housing and services, and that create more jobs for others," Akbari said.

He said Colchester worked with employers, schools and community groups to attract and retain more immigrants, and also offered business opportunities.

"It can be done."

Ted Richmond, of the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Culture, agreed that rural areas are not only declining in population, but they're losing their young people to larger cities, and they're also in danger of losing their skilled labour.

Richmond said some researchers have suggested that part of the reason why rural Ontario is missing out on immigration is because there are fewer economic opportunities. He doesn't agree.

He said small cities and rural communities invariably have lower housing costs, more access to outdoor recreational activities, and a more secure and safe environment for families, especially those with young children.

The workshop heard from Pakistan-born Zulfiqar Ali, a senior market researcher with Union Gas Limited, who moved to Chatham in 1997 after living in Toronto for only six months.

Ali said he and his wife and their three children enjoy living in Chatham-Kent, and he praised his employer for making their transition smoother.

"At Union Gas, I work with a team of people who are treated like family by our manager," Ali said. "He has been very helpful to me, and he and the company have provided a very welcoming atmosphere."

Ali said such "mentoring" has had great value.

He added that he and his wife made the move from Toronto to Chatham because they perceived that the smaller community would be a better place in which to raise their children.

"This is a wonderful community," he said.

Maureen Geddes, of the Cultural Coalition, said the group has a goal of attracting 1,000 new immigrants to Chatham-Kent between 2006 and 2010.