

Dayton's Immigration Strategy for Growth is Drawing Notice

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Dayton, Ohio – The corner of East Third Street and Bell in Dayton's East End offers a view of what happens when the American Dream leaves town.

Paints peels off the wood siding of vacant homes. Feral cats roam among the overgrown weeds and ivy that have overtaken a crumbling parking lot. A graffiti-covered restaurant sits in a state of decay. In the surrounding neighborhood homes stand empty, windows covered by plywood and "No Trespassing" signs stapled to the front doors.

The East End is one of many neighborhoods throughout the city, and the Rust Belt as a whole, that have fallen on hard times in the wake of the population loss and the departure of manufacturing jobs.

Yet, detectable too, are rumblings of new life.

Less than a quarter mile west of East Third and Bell sits a Latino owned grocery and women's clothing shop; farther down is a law office that advertises in Spanish; a few blocks from that is Taqueria Mixteca, a Mexican restaurant which overflows with customers during lunch.

These stores make up a small but growing Latino community in Dayton, attracted by cheap housing, lenient immigration enforcement, and a city initiative meant to boost its population, and its economy, by welcoming immigrants. Dayton's innovative immigration initiative --which is already having an impact-- is being closely followed as a potential model other Rust Belt communities.

"The city has been losing residents for decades with big companies like GM leaving the area," said Francisco Peláez Diaz, a Hispanic Missionary pastor at Dayton's College Hill Community Church and one of the founders of Welcome Dayton, the municipal initiative to attract immigrants.

"What is happening is that these immigrants are repopulating the city," added Peláez Diaz, who immigrated to the United States from Mexico in 2006. "What many people are doing is coming, buying vacant houses and fixing them up because housing is very affordable in Dayton."

Gradual Decline and Then a Devastating Blow

After World War II, Dayton thrived as one of the country's manufacturing hubs, along with cities like Detroit and Buffalo. Dayton's population rose 15.7 percent between 1940 and 1950 and another 7.6 percent in the next decade, according to the U.S. Census.

However, as more and more businesses left for cheaper, non-union labor in the Sun Belt and overseas in the 1970s and 80s, Dayton's population began to hollow out. The city saw a drastic decrease over the last 40 years, going from 243,601 residents in 1970 to 141,527 in 2010 – a 41.6 percent decrease.

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- Mayor Gary Leitzell

The city's economic plight was epitomized by the departure of its signature companies in the last decade. NCR, which opened its doors as the National Cash Register Company in Dayton in 1884, pulled up its stakes and moved to Atlanta in 2009. GM closed the doors of its enormous Moraine Assembly plant in December 2008 – leaving behind 2,400 jobs.

“After GM left it was like a triple effect. said Patricia Rickman, a former GM employee and the chair of Dayton's Southwest Priority Board. “All the other factories started laying off, closing up and leaving town,”

“It was really devastating to this city,” she added.

As businesses and manufacturing left, the inevitable happened: Unemployment and home foreclosure rates climbed. Currently 10.3 percent of Dayton's citizens are unemployed – over two percent higher than the national average, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

“The psychology of the local person in Dayton now seems to be that they are very down on themselves,” said Dayton's Mayor Gary Leitzell,

Banking on Immigrants to Turn the Tide

With a vanishing population and more and more vacant homes, the city saw a solution where other states and towns saw a problem: immigrants.

“I've always said that if you want to get rich in America you back any immigrant off the boat because they have the work ethic to succeed,” Leitzell said.

As the debate over immigration took center stage with the introduction of hardline immigration laws in states like Arizona, Alabama and Georgia, Dayton quietly bucked the trend last October when it adopted the Welcome Dayton initiative. The plan involves ideas to help immigrant start small businesses, integrate into the local government and gain access to certain health and social services.

The plan started when the city's Human Relations Council decided to look into rumored unfair housing practices plaguing city's Latinos residents. From the study emerged Welcome Dayton, the initiative aimed at bringing immigrants to Dayton to start small businesses, fix up homes and make Dayton a more diverse community.

"The things these immigrants here are bringing are good things," Peláez Diaz said. "They are rebuilding houses, they are hard working people, they're family oriented and they're bringing energy to the city."

Peláez Diaz said that the initiative is multi-faceted. With business development the plan aims to revamp the strip of East Third Street and help start up immigrant-owned businesses. Other goals are to increase immigrant participation in local government and help smooth the way for both immigrants and refugees to access community and health services.

"The idea with the initiative is to create an atmosphere and environment where people helping these immigrants can optimize their resources," said Tom Wahlrab, Welcome Dayton's chairperson.

Besides Latinos, Dayton has also attracted a large population of Ahiska Turks as well as a burgeoning refugee communities from countries like Iraq and Burundi.

Welcome Dayton is viewed used as a potential model for cities facing a similar plight, and is helping to change the perception of Dayton as a downbeat town to one on the move. Earlier this year Wahlrab spoke to Global Detroit, a network of organizations and people that want to revive the Motor City's economy through immigration.

"We've been at it a lot longer, we've attracted a lot more money," said Steve Tobocman of Global Detroit. "But I believe there is a certain elegance and opportunity in the plan that Dayton has put together. They've done certain things so profoundly right that I think we have a lot to learn from it."

Using Immigrants to Attract Immigrants

Juan Urbieta is one of Dayton's immigrant success stories.

Born in Guanajuato, Mexico, Urbieta came to the U.S. at the age of 14 in the trunk of car. He spent his youth moving around Texas, building condominiums before following work to Dayton. In Dayton he met his late wife and decided to put down roots.

"When I came here in [1986] there were almost no Hispanic people," Urbieta said. "They didn't even know what a tortilla or a hot pepper was."

Urbieta gained legal residency in 1988 and a few years later gained his citizenship. In that time, he saved up his money and built up his construction business.

More than 20 years later, the stocky man with a fleeting resemblance to actor Luis Guzmán may seem a little out of place in the Midwest city with his cowboy boots, pencil-thin mustache and thick accent, but he has become a well-known name in the community. And his company, Urbieta Construction, has rebuilt homes from the East End to the surrounding suburbs.

“People come here because they want to find the American Dream,” Urbieta said. “As an immigrant you have to have goals, you have to plan them and you have to go for them.”

It appears that immigrants are following Urbieta’s lead and making their way to Dayton. In 2006 the total foreign-born population of the city was 22,461 out of 838,940 total residents. Six years later, Dayton’s immigrant community numbers 29,478 out of 841,310 total residents, according to the Migration Policy Institute (MPI).

While other cities in the Rust Belt, such as Detroit, Buffalo and Cleveland also have seen an uptick in their foreign-born population, the impact on Dayton has been more significant because of its smaller population.

“They’re not real big numbers but for a small population it is still very sizeable,” said Jeanne Batalova, a demographer with the MPI. “It definitely helps out.”

Some Residents Feel Left Behind

Despite the success stories and the jobs they created, some area residents wonder why the city is putting so much effort into attracting immigrants when there are so many long term residents unemployed and looking for work. On any given day the city is full of people, hauling scrap metal in shopping carts, waiting at gas stations and doing anything they can to make a buck.

“We’ve got a lot of Americans like us that get out and scrap all day long just to make some money and get by,” said Scott Wiley, a unemployed painter who is working odd jobs to make ends meet. “It’s everywhere you look; you’ve got Hispanics working all the jobs that we used to work growing up.”

Welcome Dayton and immigration activists, however, don’t see it the same way.

“The way I look at it is that everybody has an opportunity and its what you make of that opportunity,” said Tony Ortiz, a professor and Latino community liaison for Wright State University. “If you’re just going to wait around and not go where the jobs are and go to work then that’s not a community issue, that’s a personal issue.”

Some critics of the initiative claim it has turned Dayton into a so-called “sanctuary city” for undocumented immigrants. The term refers to towns where local authorities don’t question immigrants about their legal status and has become a hot button term in the wake of the battle over Arizona’s SB1070 immigration law.

Those involved in Welcome Dayton have reported inquiries from undocumented immigrants living in states like Alabama who ask if Dayton is a safe place to live.

“Dayton, Ohio, is going to become another [illegal] immigrant-friendly ‘sanctuary city’ with its ‘Welcome Dayton Plan,’ whereat [sic] cheap-labor and government lovers and others can pick and choose which federal laws they want ignored or enforced ... excepting those regarding guns, race, sex, taxes and test scores, of course,” complains Leon Harrison of West Carrollton, Ohio in a letter to the Dayton City Paper.

The mayor and immigration activists scoff at the “sanctuary city” label and say that they are doing nothing to skirt federal laws. Leitzell said that Dayton is just taking a different approach than other states and towns.

Instead of checking people’s immigration status, Dayton takes the approach that as long as immigrants are contributing to the community and not committing crimes, the police and other local authorities won’t ask any questions.

“I think what you’ll find is that other states and cities are reacting to a perceived problem instead of being proactive,” Letizell added. “I’ve spoken to people who have been here illegally for over 10 years, and they’re married with kids and I think the issue then becomes you do them an injustice by deporting them.”

As a former undocumented immigrant, Urbietta counts himself lucky to be so successful. Sitting in a booth inside a packed Taqueria Mixteca, Urbietta carefully assembles his fajita as the restaurant fills up with the lunchtime crowd coming from East Third Street. While the East End may seem like a post-industrial graveyard, the inside of the former fast-food-joint-turned-Mexican-restaurant may give a good indication of where the neighborhood, and maybe Dayton as a whole is headed.

“I think things are going beautiful,” Urbietta said as he mixed his steak and peppers into a tortilla. “If we bring in more immigrants who want to start businesses and have new ideas than I think we’re going in the right direction.”

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