

Immigrants add luster to Metro Detroit

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There is nothing like the national press bashing Detroit to get a conversation started.

Whether it's NBC's "Dateline" portrayal of Detroit's abandoned ruins or last month's controversy started by New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg's "Meet the Press" proposal on immigration, Detroiters take notice when our name hits national news.

In case you missed it, Bloomberg argued that, "if I were the federal government, assuming you could wave a magic wand and pull everybody together, you pass a law letting immigrants come in as long as they agreed to go to Detroit and live there for five or 10 years. Start businesses, take jobs, whatever."

And cue the local debate.

Two years ago, I was commissioned by the New Economy Initiative (a coalition of 10 of the region's largest foundations), the Detroit Regional Chamber of Commerce, and the Skillman Foundation to study the impacts that immigrants have on our regional economy and job prospects for Detroiters and working families across the region. The Global Detroit study (available at www.globaldetroit.com) provided some dramatic results and confirmed that immigrants actually create significant economic growth and job opportunities for all of us.

Metro Detroit's immigrant population is among the most talented in the nation and already has made significant and important contributions to our regional economy. Michigan's immigrants are 1 1/2 times as likely to possess a college degree and have started businesses at three times the rate of nonimmigrant Michiganians. They are more than seven times as likely to invent something and apply for an international patent. And Michigan actually ranks third in the country in the share — 32.8 percent — of its high-tech firms created in the last decade that were founded by immigrants. Only California and New Jersey outrank Michigan, yet we are a low-immigration state with roughly 6 percent of our residents being immigrants.

When Detroit was the Silicon Valley of its time at the beginning of the last century, more than one-third of its population was foreign born. The Global Detroit report details immigrants as being uniquely powerful agents of economic development and transformation in Metro Detroit and across the nation.

In fact, much like the European immigrants that invented the patents, developed the products, refined the manufacturing techniques, and worked in the factories that made America the 20th century's industrial leader, modern-day immigrants from every corner of the globe are powering America's success. One-quarter of the National Academy of Sciences is foreign born. Twenty-six percent of all U.S. recipients of the Nobel Prize from 1990-2000 were foreign born. In 2009, eight of the nine Nobel Prize winners in science were Americans, and five of those eight Americans were foreign born. In fact, foreign born Americans won more Nobel Prizes in 2009 than all the other nations of the world combined.

The Global Detroit report has served as the launching point to change the regional conversation and embrace this historic opportunity. To start, a Welcoming Michigan campaign has been launched with generous support of the Ford Foundation. The New Economy Initiative has invested funding in ethnic media to tell the story of immigrant entrepreneurship. In addition, a new partnership is being launched with the University Research Corridor to convince the international students studying at our colleges and universities to join the most talented of their in-state colleagues to look at the economic

opportunities that Michigan's information technology, advanced manufacturing, alternative energy and other growing sectors offer.

Immigrant entrepreneurs

Immigrants' contributions, however, are not limited to just the highly educated and skilled. At every level of education, immigrants are more likely to be entrepreneurs, an important New Economy cultural trait in which this state trails. The presence of immigrants — no matter what their skill level — has been documented to increase the exports of our local businesses. Moreover, immigrants are most likely to be of working age, 18 to 40 years old, and are helping to combat the aging issues that Michigan faces, as we rapidly move to becoming one of the nation's oldest states. No state tax structure can support a situation where Michigan is heading in which 1 out of every 4 residents will be a senior citizen in the next 25 years.

I have spent over 16 years in southwest Detroit and other Detroit neighborhoods, working to foster community development. My passion has been improving the quality of life and creating economic opportunity for Detroit residents. Whether it has been my service in Americorps, helping to found Community Legal Resources, serving as the state representative of Detroit's 12th state House district, or spearheading Global Detroit, I have made it my life mission to address the devastation that the last 50 years of depopulation of Detroit has wreaked, particularly on the residents of these communities.

For me, the most important opportunity identified in the Global Detroit report is the impact its findings can have on these Detroit neighborhoods and residents. If nothing else, the 2010 census ought to convince any doubters that Detroit needs to become the most welcoming city in North America.

Rust Belt cities, like Detroit have the most to gain from immigration. The recent census numbers show us that Detroit's efforts to stabilize its neighborhoods need to change course. In fact, international immigration is the only significant population strategy of any scale that has worked across the Northeast and Midwest over the last 20 years. Southwest Detroit's Hispanic community, east Dearborn's Middle Eastern community, and Hamtramck's multiethnic international community are the envy of every struggling urban neighborhood in the region. In those neighborhoods, vibrant commercial retail corridors have returned. Vacant homes are being purchased and rehabbed. Parks and sidewalks are full. And safety has improved.

Empirically, the country immigrants have incarceration rates one-fifth of nonimmigrants — a statistic that might surprise you if you watch cable news.

Global connections

No one strategy will, by itself, revitalize the Detroit regional economy or the city's struggling neighborhoods. However, nothing is more powerful to remaking Detroit as a center of innovation, entrepreneurship and population growth, than embracing and increasing immigrant populations and the entrepreneurial culture and global connections that they bring. Nothing can make a more powerful contribution to Detroit's rebirth than an affirmative immigrant-welcoming and global-connection building effort. Gov. Rick Snyder has launched a Global Michigan initiative to attract and retain skilled immigrants to the state.

But the truth is, without a truly Global Detroit, Global Michigan will be a failure. Pursuing a Global Detroit addresses the region's challenges and can serve as the type of "game changing" catalyst that we so desperately need. It is time for Detroit to reclaim its place among the world's thriving, multinational global cities.

