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## Immigrants can help renew Detroit

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Anti-immigration sentiments -- and state policies -- are enjoying a seasonal, election-timed vogue.

But in the Detroit area, where the doughnut hole of an increasingly vacant city continues to expand, recruiting foreign-born residents shows potential as an urban renewal lifeline.

That perspective is building to create a strategy that will encourage immigration from abroad.

Steve Tobocman, a former state representative from southwest Detroit, has spent 18 months developing a fact-based plan for the region to seize the benefits of a more ethnically rich Detroit.

The plan includes strategies to reach out to immigrants.

On Thursday, the Detroit International Center is hosting a rollout of the Global Detroit "Welcome Mat" -- a pamphlet of services and contacts for foreign-born residents.

A pamphlet's not a revolution. But Detroit's still in the baby step era.

The flip side of that grassroots effort is a way to recruit technically sophisticated or wealthy immigrants through a local economic development center, technically known as an EB-5 investor visa regional center.

This program, devised in 1990 and blessed by the federal government, enables foreign-born investors to essentially "buy" resident status by creating at least 10 jobs and investing \$500,000 to \$1 million, using the resources of the economic development center.

Nationwide, about 80 such centers exist, including one in Saginaw and another in northern Michigan, but none in the greater Detroit area.

Other cities -- including Pittsburgh and Philadelphia -- have already opened their arms to immigrants. Canada's liberal immigration policies enabled Toronto to develop the ethnic diversity and cultural depth that makes it a business and cultural center for Americans.

At the turn of the 20th century, Detroit was one of the great American melting pots. Today, less than 5 percent of its population is from foreign countries.

As Tobocman observes, historically, no city has grown dramatically without a continuing influx of immigrants.

His family immigrated from Poland. My grandparents came from the Ukraine, England, Poland -- and

Pittsburgh.

Over generations, families forget their roots abroad. Glenn Beck didn't invent the myth of the bad immigrant: It's an American cultural refrain, a tide that ebbs and flows with economic pressures. But Tobocman's research examined, and dispelled, most of the scary myths.

Tobocman found: That foreign-born residents, and citizens, are net contributors; they are better-educated, more likely to start businesses, invent new technologies and file for new patents than your average Michigan resident.

Now, Metro Detroit hosts some of the world's largest populations of Albanian, Macedonian, Lebanese, Iraqi and Yemeni people outside their own countries, according to Global Detroit. These are people whose drive and potential need to be tapped and nurtured, to the benefit of all.

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