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Strategy for Detroit: Lure immigrants

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In Detroit, the buzz is about one incredible shrinking city -- empty houses, fewer people, fallow land aplenty for urban farms or parks.

Mayor Dave Bing wants to downsize neighborhoods. Now other influential voices are advocating an opposite tack: Bring 'em in.

Bring us your fired-up, your hungry-to-succeed, your Ph.D.s. Bring us your entrepreneurial foreign born, who were 189 percent more likely to start a business in 2008 than those of us born stateside.

For decades, Detroit's ethnic populations have migrated to the suburbs, while new immigrants largely bypass the city.

The trend is national, but it's acute in Detroit, the city that once teemed with immigrants. The region now has an immigrant population of 12.5 percent, which mirrors the national average. Detroit's is about 4.8 percent.

Those are among the findings from a draft of "Global Detroit," a study backed by foundations and industry types and shepherded by former state Rep. Steve Tobocman. The southwest Detroit resident spent a year researching how to unleash new energy in Metro Detroit.

"No American city has had population gains without immigration," says Tobocman, whose grandfather came to Detroit from Poland a century ago.

Despite Lou Dobbs-ian noise against immigration, the foreign born are likely to be drivers of growth, rather than competitors who threaten the economy. Tobocman's report offers many reasons why immigrants promise more boost than bother.

Nationally, 50 percent of engineering Ph.D.s go to foreign-born students, and almost as many in life sciences and computer sciences. A third of Michigan's high-tech firms between 1995-2005 were founded by immigrants, third in the nation.

Michigan's foreign born were six times more likely than non-immigrants to found a high-tech firm, according to the report.

Detroit has some theoretical allure: cheap housing; proximity to major universities and colleges and unmet retail needs. "But Detroit has not been a welcoming city," says Tobocman.

Elsewhere, cities from Boston to Columbus are reaching out to new immigrants. But there's no magic wand, and no cities have created new immigrant zones or special tax breaks.

Instead, Tobocman suggests the best way to attract new immigrants is to "nurture the pockets of immigrants that are already here."

But in an area that has been less than hospitable, retraining people to appreciate new settlers will be part of the strategy.

"If we build a great city, they will come," says City Councilwoman JoAnn Watson.

"Global Detroit" suggests the city won't revive without the active participation of a new immigrant population.

Lay out the welcome mat, right here and now. And be kind to your foreign neighbors, who hold one key to a viable future.

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