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Global Detroit proposes Welcoming Mat for immigrants

By Jessica Barrow

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DETROIT — Global Detroit, a study funded by the New Economy Initiative, held a dinner on Thursday, September 16 at the International Institute in Detroit to speak with members from immigrant service providers and ethnic media about forming a "welcome mat" or a central inventory of services that are provided for immigrants in southeast Michigan .

The New Economy Initiative is a philanthropic effort to accelerate the transition to an innovation-based economy in southeast Michigan among seven counties.

"A welcome mat is a network of services," said Steve Tobocman, a former Michigan state rep. who is spearheading the Global Detroit program.

There are more than 50 non-profit organizations in Southeast Michigan that provide a vast array of services to help immigrants integrate into American society. The Global Detroit "Welcome Mat" is expected to make these services easily accessible to recent immigrants, and to improve upon some services that are already offered.

"State and local governments and non-profit organizations must create strong connections between existing services and new communities," said Tobocman. "To do this, the welcome mat will be tailored to the local immigrant community."

Global Detroit began as a study in 2009 to see the impact that immigrants and global connections have on the region.

"The initiative is designed to create economic growth in southeast Michigan, from the assets and opportunities that immigrant and global connections can provide to the region," said Tobocman.

Global Detroit plans to do this by making the region more attractive to immigrants, internationals and foreign trade, as well as strengthening Detroit's connection to the world.

In southeast Michigan, there was a 238% increase in the number of immigrants from 1980 to 2007 according to Tobocman.

Those present at the meeting broke off into four groups, focused on the five aspects of building a welcome mat: creating a searchable website, designating and funding a central organization, funding Welcome Mat services, building capacity for immigrant service providers and utilizing ethnic media to improve access to the services.

"We already emerged with a sketch for immigration legal services, to enhance the level of service immigrants receive," Tobocman said. "We sketched out ways to network and work together cooperatively."

In addition to improving services, guests worked to build a framework for the welcome mat.

"Our goal was to debut the guide book for the study process, which documents 50 service providers and the services they offer. Also we wanted to get preliminary feedback on how we envisioned making this host organization and get recommendations," said Tobocman. "We had a survey that guests filled out on how best to deliver a robust Welcome Mat."

The proposal for the Welcome Mat will be presented next month to the New Economy Initiative and while Tobocman is hopeful the proposal will be accepted and receive funding. Even if it is not, he said he will be happy with the results he has already obtained.

"Just the study itself is an enormous contribution and has already had a profound effect on the region and changing attitudes toward immigrants and the international community," he said. "Regardless of the decision, a number of these initiatives are going to move forward with a renewed energy."
