

THE BUFFALO NEWS

The Editorial Board: Growing our pool of human capital expands the pie for region's economy

News Editorial Board

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Buffalo Niagara's "woe is us" attitude has packed up and left town. The region is leaning into a growth mind-set that top business and community leaders reflect upon in Sunday's Buffalo News Prospectus edition.

Numbers from the 2020 U.S. census planted the seeds of optimism. The City of Buffalo's population grew by 6.5% in the past decade, while Erie County's rose 3.8%, outperforming the gains of other counties in upstate New York.

Immigrants from other countries were the leading contributors to our growth, but not the only ones. There are Buffalo expatriates choosing to move back, millennials who want to be in a livable mid-sized city and students from our colleges and universities who come to get an education, then realize they don't want to leave.

The transition from decline to expansion will bring new opportunities, along with some growing pains. Businesses can count on gaining new customers without needing to lure them away from competitors. More dollars will be pumped into the local economy while more taxpayers are contributing to sustaining our community services.

There will be more residential construction in the region, to keep up with the growing demand for housing. Demand for now is outracing the supply, causing bidding wars that make home sellers happy and buyers frustrated. It also drives up local real estate prices, which puts pressure on the rental market. It's not in our community's interest to displace older residents or those of lesser financial means and force them to leave the city, nor do we want the price of admission for new residents to become too steep.

The turnaround from a dwindling population to one that's growing is itself an impressive achievement for a city in the Rust Belt. The challenge, of course, is how to continue our ascent. Cities large and small are trying to reinvent themselves; they are our competitors.

Buffalo Niagara will need to put marketing muscle into touting the city's virtues, not just as a fun place to visit for a weekend but as a great place to live. Whether it's primary migration from other countries, secondary from other U.S. cities or climate migration from anywhere, we must spread the message that all are wanted.

Our region's efforts at welcoming people from other countries have born fruit. For example, Buffalonians who moved away from the West Side 25 years ago would scarcely recognize it now. Diversity is a strength in our multicultural city, which is fortunate to have several nonprofit resettlement agencies for new residents.

New American Economy, a pro-immigration research and advocacy organization, assigns grades to cities based on how they set up immigrants for success. The group in 2021 graded Buffalo at 3.67, out of a top score of 5. Buffalo received top grades for government leadership and economic empowerment, but only scored 1's in job opportunities and economic prosperity.

Businesses that try to employ more refugees will reap dividends. A 2018 report from Tent Partnership for Refugees and the Fiscal Policy Institute showed that companies that hire refugees benefited from better retention – refugees tend to stay with their employers longer than other hires. They also gained in recruiting, as refugees who find a workplace where they feel welcome tend to tell others.

Federal policies, of course, affect the pool of foreign talent. Former President Donald Trump put considerable curbs on legal immigration. According to the Cato Institute, the second half of fiscal year 2020 (ending in September 2020) saw the U.S. gain 87% fewer immigrants from abroad than in the first half, the largest decline in U.S. history. That has been a contributing factor to our country's shortage of workers. The Biden administration has been raising the quotas and should continue to expand them.

The new normal in weather across the country has nothing to do with coronavirus. Dramatic storms, rising sea levels, forest fires and droughts are all too commonplace, showing that climate change is not a someday prediction but a present reality.

Posting "I Love Buffalo" signs in some beleaguered cities may help some climate refugees to look us over, but there is also a role for the federal government. In cities like New Orleans, which still bears the scars of Hurricane Katrina, it doesn't make sense to keep pouring money into trying to insulate against future weather havoc. In 2019 alone, Louisiana's population declined by nearly 13,000.

Instead of building back better, a smarter investment by the federal government would be giving financial support to relocating New Orleans residents who are ready to strike out for new territory. That's just one example. There are many others as climate change ratchets up the misery index in many American locations. Our city by the Great Lakes would be happy to show some Northern hospitality to residents of Louisiana or anywhere else that is challenged by a rapidly changing climate.

Buffalo Niagara's decade of growth is one to celebrate and build upon, as long as we keep our foot firmly on the gas pedal.