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Plain Dealer (Cleveland)

May 20, 2009 Wednesday
Final Edition; All Editions

Immigrants help drive **Philadelphia's** revival

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SECTION: NATIONAL; Pg. A1

LENGTH: 1328 words

Vacant homes. Empty storefronts. Ghostly streets.

In a scenario hauntingly familiar to Cleveland, sprawl and abandonment diminished a great American city.

By 2000, many had given up on **Philadelphia**, which had seen its middle class flee and crime surge as row-house neighborhoods hollowed out.

Then, a tide of newcomers arrived - seemingly out of nowhere - and wrote a new script.

The City of Brotherly Love has not escaped the job losses and anxieties of the great recession, but it's showing a new spring in its civic step.

Power saws whirl and bright shop windows beckon in once-forgotten neighborhoods. Biotech startups are energizing the suburbs. New apartments and restaurants set downtown aglow at night.

Come the census of 2010, **Philadelphia** might post its first population gain in 60 years. My what a difference an immigrant wave can make.

Not long ago, demographers packaged **Philadelphia** with Cleveland as a "former gateway" on a downhill slide. Then, in November, they spied a surprising trend. Immigrants were coming, bringing a culture of entrepreneurship and high-tech skills. The Brookings Institution declared that **Philadelphia** was poised to re-emerge as a destination city.

What happened? Some Cleveland civic leaders would like to find out so they can replicate the pattern here. To start the discussion, they are bringing to town the woman deemed largely responsible for **Philadelphia's** transformation into an immigrant-friendly city.

Anne O'Callaghan, an Irish immigrant, is the founder and executive director of the Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians. Her nonprofit agency put out a welcome mat in 2003 and today works to assimilate new cultures into an aging blue-collar town.

O'Callaghan is to address the City Club of Cleveland on Thursday, then join a discussion on the prospects of adding new cultures to Cleveland.

Immigration is a politically sensitive topic long avoided in Northeast Ohio. But Barbara Hawkins thinks the time has come to address it.

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Hawkins, a director of the Cleveland Council on World Affairs, helped to organize O'Callaghan's visit. She is part of a small group urging politicians and civic leaders to consider immigrant attraction strategies.

"I think that's the future of Cleveland," Hawkins said. "If we don't get some good, talented, capable people here, we're in trouble. I think the situation has gotten grim enough that the business community is starting to say, 'We have to do something.'"

Slowly, new voices are joining the discussion. Cuyahoga County Commissioner Peter Lawson Jones agreed to moderate Thursday's forum. The Greater Cleveland Partnership, the region's chamber of commerce, joined the Cavaliers as a co-sponsor.

"It's pretty clear the statistics show immigrants not only bring the talent, they bring investment dollars," said Partnership President and Chief Executive Joseph Roman. "We certainly have raised it way up on our agenda."

Mayor Frank Jackson said he worries about immigrants taking jobs but notes the region has thousands of high-skill jobs that go unfilled. If a welcome center can help lure needed talent and promote the city, he's all for it.

All agree, Cleveland has a people problem. The city lost half its population between 1950 and 2000 and became nearly entirely native-born. The slide continues. In 2006 and 2007, the city lost more people than any other big city in America. It could slip below 400,000 at the 2010 census.

Philadelphia once shared a similar trajectory. It shrank by 30 percent between 1950 and 2000. But in recent years, its population has stabilized. Immigrants began replacing people leaving. Today, they make up 11 percent of the city.

Behind the numbers are people like Calvin Pham, who opened an air freight service in a city shopping center astir with immigrant entrepreneurs.

Virtually every shop in New World Plaza, in South **Philadelphia**, is owned by a couple from Vietnam or China. Pham came from California three years ago, lured by word that **Philadelphia** was friendly to immigrants.

From Thanh Binh Cargo, he ships laptops and baby formula and big-screen TVs to Ho Chi Minh City. A pair of squawking chickens in a cardboard box attests to the fact that Vietnamese like their American relatives to send poultry, too.

"Vietnamese people are doing good here," Pham said. "People keep coming in. They want to send things home."

There was plenty of other anecdotal evidence of an immigrant tide when the **Philadelphia** Foundation hired the Brookings Institution to put numbers to the faces.

The conclusions caused a sensation in a city with a demographic profile similar to Cleveland's. Between 2000 and 2006, about 113,000 immigrants streamed into Greater **Philadelphia**, swelling the foreign-born community to half a million people, Brookings reported. They came from all over the world, but the largest group - 39 percent - hailed from Asia.

A substantial number of the newcomers opened shops in poor neighborhoods. Many brought advanced skills into the region's medical and pharmaceutical industries, according to Brookings researchers, who predicted **Philadelphia** was returning to its immigrant past.

Not everyone was happy to hear it. At Geno's Steaks, a famous purveyor of **Philadelphia's** signature dish - the cheesesteak - customers are confronted with signs that say, "This is America. Please speak English when ordering."

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Restaurant owner Joe Vento, a 60-something grandson of Italian immigrants, has said he's fed up with newcomers in the formerly Italian neighborhood not knowing English.

On and around the busy commercial corridor of 52nd Street, black residents charged that new immigrant shopkeepers were getting ahead with government help - a false but widely believed assumption.

"In a city with a large African-American community, immigration is a hot-button issue," O'Callaghan acknowledges.

She recently opened Welcoming Center West in a 52nd Street storefront to bring together black and immigrant merchants. Their combined power is being credited with reviving the Harlem-like neighborhood.

On a recent afternoon, sidewalk tables piled with merchandise stretched for five lively blocks up 52nd Street. People strolled past vendors who greeted them in lilting West African accents in front of Chinese restaurants and Pakistani-owned variety stores.

"We've come a long way," O'Callaghan observed.

She said that when she first took her idea to City Hall, she found no interest in a center that would welcome and guide immigrants. So she launched the Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians in donated space with state and foundation support.

It began publishing simple but powerful brochures, like "How to Open a Coffee Shop in **Philadelphia**," building a database of English as a Second Language classes and matching immigrant skills with employers.

O'Callaghan preached "shared prosperity."

If immigrants came and did well, she argued, the whole city would flourish.

Today, **Philadelphia** City Hall is part of her crusade. Current Mayor Michael Nutter ordered city departments to become multilingual, hired immigrant liaisons and hosted a naturalization ceremony - the first ever in City Hall.

Earlier this year, the mayor announced a plan that would have once sounded dreamlike but now seems plausible. He said he wants to add another 75,000 people to the city in a few short years.

"You need to be able to see how your community can be transformed," O'Callaghan said. "And we have a lot of places in the city where you can walk down the street and see that."

Plain Dealer computer-assisted reporting editor Rich Exner contributed to this story. To reach this Plain Dealer reporter: rsmith@plaind.com, 216-999-4024

BOX

Talk planned

Anne O'Callaghan, director of the Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians, will address the City Club of Cleveland on Thursday. The luncheon begins at noon. Afterward, Cuyahoga County Commissioner Peter Lawson Jones will lead a discussion on the prospects of an international welcome center in Northeast Ohio.

For reservations, call:

216-621-0082.

LOAD-DATE: May 21, 2009

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

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GRAPHIC: PHOTOGRAPHS BY AKIRA SUWA SPECIAL TO THE PLAIN DEALER Anne O'Callaghan sought support from foundations and state officials when **Philadelphia** City Hall dismissed her idea of a welcome center.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY AKIRA SUWA SPECIAL TO THE PLAIN DEALER Programs at Welcoming Center West, like this storytelling gathering, bring together native-born and immigrant neighbors on the largely black west side of **Philadelphia**.

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PUBLICATION-TYPE: Newspaper

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