

# Dayton Welcomes Immigrants As Policy Point

Dan Sewell, Associated Press

DAYTON, Ohio (AP) — On the same afternoon thousands of Hispanics in Alabama took the day off to protest the state's strict new immigration law, Mexican-born Francisco Mejia was ringing up diners' bills and handing containers piled with carnitas to drive-thru customers on the east side of Dayton.

His family's Taqueria Mixteca is thriving on a street pockmarked with rundown buildings and vacant storefronts. It gets packed with a diverse lunchtime clientele of Hispanic laborers, white men in suits and other customers, white and black. "Business is very good," Mejia said, smiling broadly between orders.

It's the kind of success story that leaders in Dayton think offers hope for an entire city. It has adopted a plan not only to encourage immigrants to come and feel welcome here, but also to use them to help pull out of an economic tailspin.

Dayton officials, who adopted the "Welcome Dayton" plan unanimously Oct. 5, say they aren't condoning illegal immigration; those who come here illicitly will continue to be subject to U.S. laws.

While states including Alabama, Georgia and Arizona, as well as some cities, have passed laws in recent years cracking down on illegal immigrants, Dayton officials say they will leave that to federal authorities and focus instead on how to attract and assimilate those who come legally.

Other cities, including nearby Columbus and Indianapolis, have programs to help immigrants get government and community help, but Dayton's effort has a broader, and more urgent, feel.

Mayor Gary Leitzell told the city commission before the vote that immigrants bring "new ideas, new perspectives and new talent to our workforce. ... To reverse the decades-long trend of economic decline in this city, we need to think globally."

Hard-hit for years by the struggles of U.S. manufacturing, particularly in the auto industry, the recession pounded Dayton, which as the Wright Brother's hometown calls itself "the birthplace of aviation."

Thousands of jobs were lost with the crippling 2009 exodus to Georgia of NCR (formerly National Cash Register), one of Dayton's signature corporations, after 125 years, and by the 2008 shutdown of a General Motors plant in suburban Moraine.

Dayton's unemployment is nearly 11 percent, 2 percent higher than the national average, while population has fallen below 142,000, down 15 percent from 2000. Meanwhile, the city's official foreign-born population rose 57 percent, to 5,102, from 2000 to 2010, according to census figures.

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City leaders aiming to turn Dayton around started examining the immigrant population: Indian doctors in hospitals; foreign-born professors and graduate students at the region's universities; and owners of new small businesses such as a Turkish family's New York Pizzeria on the city's east side and Hispanic-run car lots, repair shops and small markets. They say immigrants have revitalized some rundown housing, moving into and fixing up what had been vacant homes.

"This area has been in a terrible recession, but it would be even worse without them," said Theo Majka, a University of Dayton sociology professor who, with his sociologist wife Linda Majka, has studied and advocated for Dayton's immigrants. "Here we have this underutilized resource."

Dayton officials say their plan still needs funding and volunteers to help put it in place; they hope by the end of the year. Its key tenets include increasing information and access to government, social services and housing issues; language education and help with identification cards, and grants and marketing help for immigrant entrepreneurs to help build the East Third Street section.

"We will be more diverse, we will grow, we will have more restaurants, more small businesses," said Tom Wahlrab, the city's human relations council director, who helped lead the plan's development.

Besides thousands of Hispanics, there are communities in Dayton of Iraqi refugees, Vietnamese and other Asians, Africans from several countries, and Russians and Turks who, officials say, are already living here quietly and industriously.

"Immigrants are hard workers with a propensity to create jobs, and this will invigorate the economy," said Festus Nyiwo, an attorney in his home country of Nigeria who has been a small-business entrepreneur since coming to Dayton about eight years ago.

Around the country, the bad economy has helped inspire new laws targeting illegal immigrants, seen as taking scarce jobs and overburdening schools, police and services.

In Alabama, a new law allows police to detain indefinitely those suspected of being in the country illegally and requires schools to check new students' status; some farms and businesses say they're losing workers because of it. Georgia and Arizona also added tough restrictions.

The immigration debate continues in Hazleton, Pa., where officials five years ago passed a law aimed at driving out illegal immigrants they blamed for drugs, violent crime and overwhelming schools and hospitals. The measure has since been tied up in court challenges.

Dorothy Balsler, manager of refugee resettlement services for Catholic Social Services, said that finding jobs can be a struggle, but that refugees have generally been able to fit into the Dayton community. She thinks the Welcome Dayton plan

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will have a "natural positive effect" on those already here without causing a significant rise in numbers immediately.

Dayton's schools say they're helping 525 students learn English, up from 420 less than two years ago. About half are native Spanish-speakers; the rest are a mix of Turkish, Arabic, Swahili and more. They're ready to accept more.

"We already are currently experiencing many students from many nationalities living in Dayton. That is a reality," said Jill Moberly, a spokeswoman for Dayton Public Schools.

Opponents fear it will encourage illegal immigration and give preferences to immigrants.

"If Dayton wants to help build its economy by letting people know that illegal immigrants are welcome, that's their prerogative," said Steve Salvi, founder of Ohio Jobs & Justice PAC, an advocacy group that focuses on illegal immigration. "But when they accept a plan that clearly has the purpose of including those people, that's a problem for everyone."

Roy Barber, who owns Roy's Lock Shop on East Third Street, says he's been in business for 30 years and doesn't like the city's plan.

"Nobody ever talked to me," he said. "Why not help us?"

Barber said most of the neighborhood's Hispanic immigrants work hard and cause no problems. But he predicts Welcome Dayton will bring more illegal immigrants.

"You see people out on the street and you know they're illegal," he said.

Rich Lober, 50, a lifelong Dayton resident, said Mexican and other immigrants have helped East Third.

"I like the idea of rejuvenating this neighborhood," Lober said. But he said Dayton should look to draw back former residents.

"I'd like to see a 'Welcome Back.' They should include American citizens, too," Lober said.

Black resident David Dewberry told city officials it's important not to neglect predominantly black neighborhoods, where residents might wonder where their welcome plan is.

"Rightfully so, there are some lifelong residents who are disenchanting," he said.

At Taqueria Mixteca, Mejia's mother and restaurant manager, Marta Guzman, believes Welcome Dayton will help relieve stereotypes.

"I know there are some (immigrants) who are causing crime and problems," said

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Guzman, who has lived in the United States for three decades, legalized through the 1986 amnesty program.

"I have struggled a lot in this country, working two jobs, raising three children" as a single mother, she said. "Most of us are here to work hard and to live the American dream."

Will the new policy bring more immigrants? Mejia smiled again.

"We're already hearing that there are some Mexicans who are planning to come here from Alabama," he said.

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