



Immigrants the answer, Council told A Phila. plan seeks "replacement people"

By Monica Rhor

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Calling it the best way to offset the population loss that is draining Philadelphia of jobs, small businesses and homeowners, City Councilman James T. Kenney will release a plan today to attract immigrants to the city.

"It's a matter of survival, urban survival," Kenney, who has been pushing a pro-immigration initiative since November, said yesterday. "It's within our self-interest as a city to engage this process."

The plan outlines 12 steps that Philadelphia - which lags behind New York and other large U.S. cities in drawing newcomers - can take to attract immigrants. Kenney said he believed they would help revitalize blighted neighborhoods and pump up the city's economy.

The plan's most ambitious recommendation would be the creation of an "Office of New Philadelphians."

The office would assist new arrivals on multiple levels, Kenney said, making newcomers feel more welcome here. The office would be funded through private foundations, thus keeping the cost to the city to a minimum, he said.

The office, patterned after similar offices in Boston and New York, would offer such services as English classes and translation assistance, help with citizenship applications, and housing and health-service referrals. In addition, staffers would act as liaisons between non-English-speaking immigrants and city agencies.

Kenney attributes New York's success in attracting new immigrants to its Office of Immigrant Affairs.

Other recommendations include recruiting more foreign-born college students, promoting Philadelphia in foreign consulates as a prime destination for immigrants, and increasing the number of bilingual classes in the school district.

He also recommends that Philadelphia International Airport open more international gates to airlines that serve countries in Southeast Asia, Latin America and Africa - which are producing the current influx of immigrants. Currently, the airport only offers flights to Western European countries.

Kenney said he planned to forward the report to the other members of City Council and to lobby for its implementation and for support of his initiatives.

"It works and it can be done," said Kenney, who has met resistance from constituents who fear that bringing in more immigrants will take jobs away from native-born residents and further strain city services.

Kenney, immigration advocates, and economists from the Pennsylvania Economy League point to other cities that lost residents yet managed to show population increases because they attracted large numbers of immigrants.

While Kenney believes that with the right inducement, more immigrants will come here, some demographers and sociologists wonder whether anything can be done to influence established immigration patterns.

Jeffrey Passel, a demographer with the Urban Institute in Washington, said two things traditionally draw immigrants: jobs or the promise of jobs, and an existing immigrant enclave.

"Simply saying to immigrants, 'Come here, we like you,' isn't going to get people to come," Passel said. "Given a choice, people are more likely to go where there are jobs and where they know people."

Still, Passel acknowledged, some immigrants could be drawn to a city that does offer immigrant-friendly services and amenities.

The larger question, he noted, is whether new immigrants spur economic revitalization.

"There seems to be a correlation between the presence of immigrants in a city and economic growth, but one of the puzzles and challenges is to separate what causes what," Passel said.

"Does economic vitality cause immigration, or does immigration cause economic vitality?"

The 2000 census shows that New York lost 15 percent of its domestic population yet grew 8 percent and showed a population record of 8 million. Chicago gained 4 percent in population. Both cities are top destinations for immigrants.

Philadelphia, on the other hand, lost 4 percent of its population, shrinking to 1.5 million. The city ranks 19th as the intended destination for immigrants.

All 12 recommendations in his report, Kenney said, were designed with the idea of both making the city more attractive to immigrants and helping immigrants feel more welcome once they arrived.

At public hearings on the issue in November, many immigrants and advocates complained that city agencies and officials were often unresponsive and sometimes hostile to non-English speakers.

"I learned that there are real obstacles for people who are here legally," said Kenney, noting that many banks don't accept permanent resident cards as identification although they are government-issued documents.

Kenney believes that immigrants, at the very least, will help stem the drain on the city's population and, at best, will spur the neighborhood rebirth seen in sections of New York such as Flushing, Washington Heights and Jackson Heights, where immigrants from Asia, South America and the Caribbean have opened businesses, restaurants and factories.

"If we had begun this process 10 years ago, we wouldn't have the need for blight removal," Kenney said. "We need replacement people, and this is a way to get them."