

# Summary Report

## Grey Bruce Welcoming Communities Forum

May 9, 2013



### Introduction

The Welcoming Communities Forum was held on May 9<sup>th</sup> at the Bayshore Arena, with approximately 70 participants from diverse backgrounds and sectors: Health, YMCA, Community Living, Grey County, City of Owen Sound, Bruce Power, RBC Bank, United Way, OSCVI, Bruce Grey Child and Family Services, Bayshore Broadcasting, Four County Labour Market Planning Board, Ministry of Agriculture and Food and Ministry of Rural Affairs, North Grey

Union Library, Adult Literacy, OSDIA, Caframo, Business Enterprise Centre, Aids Guelph and Grey Bruce Pride, Peace and Justice Grey Bruce, as well as individual citizens. The Forum was organized by a new community group, the Grey Bruce Welcoming Communities Initiative made up of people interested in improving services and community supports for newcomers to the region.

### An Overview of the Forum

- Joan Irvine presented on the background activities that led to the founding of the Grey Bruce Welcoming Communities Initiative, and provided an overview of her research into action taken in other rural communities to support newcomers (Local Immigration Partnership programs and Welcoming Centres, Settlement Services). Members of the Welcoming Communities Committee stressed the need for settlement services and supports in our region (the closest services are a 2 hour drive).
- Gemma Mendez Smith from the Four County Labour Market Planning Board engaged the participants in a discussion on 'who is a newcomer?'. She presented a recent study on Migration Characteristics & Trends for the region of Bruce, Grey, Huron and Perth and the need for immigrant and newcomer engagement to support economic development and sustainability in the region. Cheryl Brine from the Ministry of Agriculture and Food, and Ministry of Rural Affairs presented on the Community Immigrant Retention in Ontario program (CIRRO)

and the experiences in other rural communities that have developed Settlement and Welcoming programs.

- A panel of five newcomers provided a personal perspective of the challenges for newcomers to the area, what the area has to offer, and suggestions for action. Panel presenters were: Maja Juric, Aleksandar Nikolic, Elizabeth Matthew, Matthew Villeneuve and Faridoon Gilani.
- The Forum participants then used a “Round Table Discussion’ format to discuss priority action and next steps needed to support newcomers to the region.

The three hour forum was co facilitated by Joan Irvine and Colleen Purdon from the Grey Bruce Welcoming Communities Initiative.

## **Recommendations from the Round Table Discussion**

- We need a **clearly identifiable, central source of information for newcomers** (a physical place and an online presence). Currently existing supports are hard to find for newcomers. Panel members noted that if you don’t know a service exists (because it didn’t exist in the home country) you don’t even look for it. Newcomers need a ‘place to connect’ to meet service and social needs. There was a suggestion for a ‘one stop shop’ for newcomers, a place where we create community that could be highlighted on the city (and other) websites so it is easy to find – a non institutional welcoming place.
- There are opportunities to **create community as neighbours, co-workers, bystanders** by welcoming diversity and newcomers. There is a need for more positive attitudes towards immigrants, diverse cultures and the presence of newcomers in the community. There are barriers for newcomers, gays and lesbians, people of colour, and Aboriginal people because of fear and biases. We can build on the work that is being done by the Grey Bruce One World Festival.
- There is a need for **more jobs and employment opportunities** in the region. Look at strategies to address employment opportunities for spouses as well.
- Develop **specific recruitment strategies for skilled workers** to fill existing jobs in the area.
- Develop **volunteer mentoring, ‘buddy’ and friendship programs** to support newcomers, immigrants and refugees.
- A need for **expanded language programs** for both adults and children in the school system. Currently English as a second language services are limited to a few hours a week, and there is no base funding for these services. One participant described difficulties getting English instruction in the school system.

- Need specific strategies to **attract youth, and support youth returning** to the community after they have completed their educations. Create programs and supports that target youth: attend university fairs, consult with youth in the community, use promotional materials youth can 'see' themselves in the pictures and branding, hold Teen Forums in local high schools to promote returning to the region, and post study options
- Need to **address isolation of newcomers** – for example address transportation issues, use a buddy system with volunteers to actively follow up with newcomers and 'close the circle'.
- There is a role for the DIA, Chamber of Commerce and Business Enterprise Centre to **work together to attract and support newcomers**. For example – ways to reduce red tape and to support easier processes for new businesses.
- **More coordination is needed between existing services and agencies** to support newcomer access to existing services and supports. For example, newcomers report difficulty getting a family doctor and need help with this. Another suggestion was to promote and expand the 211 service for newcomers.
- **Existing services need to be more coordinated and learn about the information needs of newcomers**. Existing services can be more proactive identifying barriers to participation (ethnic, language, religious, cultural, sexual orientation, disability) and in the development of collective strategies to address these. There was a suggestion to include newcomer strategies with the Poverty Task Force.
- Look at **new ways to attract immigrants and new Canadians** (attend trade shows, promote the community and lifestyle, use promotional materials where newcomers can see themselves in the community).
- **Collect success stories** (about newcomer experience, newcomer businesses) and use these to promote and attract newcomers.
- There is a need for **safe and affordable housing** for newcomers.
- **Seek opportunities for government funding** to support the welcoming community initiative and move forward with this initiative.

## Next Steps

1. **Distribute this report** to all participants of the Welcoming Communities Forum, key community stakeholders, and local politicians. Look for opportunities to present these findings to City of Owen Sound, and Bruce and Grey Counties, and other key stakeholders such as the Bluewater Board of Education, Catholic Board of Education, Public Health, etc.
2. **Research opportunities for federal/provincial/municipal/foundation funding** to move the community process forward, using the Local Immigration Partnership program as a best practice model.
3. **Hold another community event** that brings information about community processes and rural models in other communities. Invite presenters from communities with established newcomer programs: Simcoe County, Peterborough, Huron County, North Bay, Guelph/Wellington.



## Conclusion

The Welcoming Community Forum identified strong community support and interest in building a more inclusive and welcoming approach to a wide range of newcomers. This was demonstrated through active attendance and engagement by the 70 participants at the Forum. The discussion and panel clearly identified community needs and a list of recommended actions to improve our communities ability to attract and retain newcomers. There was also strong support for moving forward with this initiative from Forum participants, and a great deal of enthusiasm and connection at the Forum.

Thank you to all of the panel members, presenters and participants at the Welcoming Communities Forum. Thank you to the members of the Welcoming Communities Initiative for their input and help with the organization of the Forum. It was a positive start, and we are very excited about the next steps.

**If you have any questions or comments please contact us at:**

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