



THE CORPORATION OF THE CITY OF VERNON

MINUTES OF

THE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ADVISORY COMMITTEE

HELD THURSDAY, JANUARY 20, 2022, at 4:00 PM

OKANAGAN LAKE ROOM

PRESENT: **VOTING:**

Mayor Cumming, Chairperson
Jenna Stasuk, Accelerate Okanagan Rep.
Jane Lister, Okanagan College Rep.
Colin Wilson, Executive Director, UBCO
Richard Toperczer, Prov of BC – Reg. Ec. Dev. Branch Rep.
Leigha Horsfield, Community Futures North Okanagan
Dan Proulx, Greater Vernon Chamber of Commerce (Alternate)

GUESTS: Ward Mercer, Regional Coordinator, Rural &
Northern Immigration Pilot, Community Futures North Okanagan
James Weir, Registered Canadian Immigration Consultant

ABSENT: Tannis Nelson, Regional District of North Okanagan Rep.
Annette Sharkey, Social Planning of North Okanagan
Councillor Mund, Appointed

STAFF: John Perrott, Manager, Economic Development & Tourism
Roy Nuriel, Economic Development Planner
Tracy Mueller, Committee Clerk

**LAND
ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

As chair of the City of Vernon's Economic Development Advisory Committee, and in the spirit of this gathering, I recognize the City of Vernon is located in the traditional territory of the Syilx people of the Okanagan nation.

ORDER

The Chair called the meeting to order at 4:01 PM

**ADOPTION OF
AGENDA**

Moved by J. Stasuk, and seconded by J. Lister:

THAT the agenda for the Thursday, January 20, 2022, meeting of the Economic Development Advisory Committee be adopted.

CARRIED

Moved by C. Wilson, and seconded by L. Horsfield:

**ADOPTION OF
MINUTES**

THAT the minutes for the Thursday, October 14, 2021, meeting of the Economic Development Advisory Committee be adopted.

CARRIED

UNFINISHED BUSINESS:

There were no unfinished business items to discuss.

NEW BUSINESS:

Staff provided a brief introduction to the Committee concerning the emergent need to facilitate newcomers immigrating to Vernon to help grow the City and also to address the impacts associated with the current labour shortage. An overview of the discussion topic is as follows:

In 2021, members of the Economic Development Advisory Committee participated in Vernon’s annual “Business Walk Survey”. The aim of the survey was to better understand local employment trends and challenges facing small business. The broader story was that the survey identified that there was significant demand for “new talent” and that many local businesses were having challenges finding qualified local staff in the current job market.

Some key factors influencing the staffing shortage in our region include:

- Demographic Changes (Aging Population);
- Adjustments in How Business is Conducted Due to the Global Pandemic (i.e., Remote Work); and
- An Evolving Economic Climate.

The act of promoting and fostering new business opportunities and how business is conducted within the City of Vernon has evolved significantly over the past two years. As a result, there is an emergent need to explore creative opportunities to round-out the labour shortages that have been facing business owners within the interior.

For the City of Vernon to become an attractive option for foreign workers there several contributing factors.

Some of the key reasons why people decide to leave their home country and seek new opportunities in a foreign country, are as follows:

- Lack of Services;
- Lack of Safety;
- High Level of Crime / Political Unrest;
- Fear of Persecution; and
- National Disasters.

The City of Vernon can work with partners to make Vernon an attractive community for newcomers by taking strides to promote thoughtful programming that supports the following initiatives:

1. Targeting and Promoting Newcomer Engagement;
2. Fostering Welcoming and Inclusive Programming; and
3. Actively Supporting Newcomer Transitioning.

From a business / employer perspective, the aim is to think about the immigration path in a linear fashion:

- What is the Best Approach to Advertise Opportunities?
- How Do Newcomers Move to Vernon?
- What is the Strategy to Attract Newcomers to Stay?
- What Does the Application Process Look Like?
- How Does the Settlement Process Work?
- How Do Newcomers Establish Roots in Vernon?

The goal is to explore programming that facilitates making the City of Vernon the "**stopping point**" rather than having newcomers start their path to Canada in Vernon but then move on to some of the larger cities within Canada to establish their livelihoods, families and put down permanent roots.

The purpose of the group panel discussion is to better understand how to identify the gaps in the immigration process related to Vernon, to keep candidates engaged, interested, and impart the desire for newcomers to stay within the City of Vernon and make it their "forever" home.

DELEGATION PRESENTATIONS:**W. Mercer, Regional Coordinator, Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot, Community Futures, North Okanagan.**

- The delegation provided an overview of the Rural & Northern Immigration Pilot (RNIP) and Community Boundary Map and clarified that the boundaries encompass a 40 KM radius which focuses on the downtown Vernon area.
- The aim of RNIP is to incentivize people to come to communities and be **retained** by the communities.
- The work permits that go with the RNIP program are faster to obtain than a typical permit.

The basic requirements for obtaining a permit and engaging in the program are as follows:

- **Federal**
 - High school education;
 - Language test;
 - One year of work experience;
 - Fulltime employment from a local business; and
 - Settlement funds.
- **Community Criteria**
 - Intention to reside;
 - Wage requirements (at least over \$18 per hour);
 - Employment training; and
 - Creation of a “Candidate Profile”.

The delegation noted that the goal is to not put too many requirements on the applicants but that it is important that they understand there are some comprehensive (mandatory) requirements that **must** be fulfilled in order to be considered a candidate for the program.

Overview of Program Success & Statistics:

- 132 Principal Applicants;
- 283 Individuals (spouses and families);
- Over 200 Approved Employees;
- 35,000 Candidate Profiles created. If a business is looking for someone there is a huge pool of talent that can be accessed; and,
- Dozens of Industries and Professions are Applicable.

Recent Changes to the Program:

1. Wage requirement was a minimum of \$25 / hr.
 - Was dropped to \$18 / hr.
2. There was an additional language requirement
 - Now reflects the Federal requirements to CLB4.
3. More points for connections to the community (current pass mark is 67 points, i.e., applicants must score 67 or higher).
 - Wanted to have more connections for applicants to rise to the top of the selection process.
4. Business investment requirements
 - Good standing within the community.

Hurdles, Challenges, and Shortfalls:

- Number of Employees Needed.
 - Based on the requirements and the demands it makes it difficult for small businesses to bring in the number of people needed.
- Lower Skilled, Lower Wage Positions Need Staffing.
 - The program focusses on higher level accreditation.
- Housing
 - People need to find a place where they can live. Finding affordable housing is a challenge.
- Financial Stability of Applicant
 - It is costly to come to Canada / Vernon; financial stability is a requirement.
- Retention Rate.
 - Normally this is a challenge; however, the delegation clarified that the City of Vernon has one of the highest retention rates in the Region.

Next Steps and Opportunities:

- Bringing in more businesses to participate;
- Promoting the database of interested foreign nationals;
- Helping to increase knowledge of the pilot program;
- Expanding the pilot program to surrounding communities; and
- Producing more videos and marketing products to highlight the merits and advantages of why Vernon is an attractive place to work, live and play.

The City of Vernon's Role:

1. Informing the public about immigration work permit options;
2. Promoting advocacy for existing work programs and the expansion of others;
3. Designing municipal strategies to help small businesses leverage the existing programming; and
4. Becoming a designated partner in the Government of Canada's **Global Talent Stream (GTS)** – GTS is an immigration program that allows qualified applicants to enter the country much faster versus the standard immigration stream. The City could feasibly become a "Designated Partner"; with a Designated Partner accreditation, the City of Vernon could then recommend two (2) candidates per year.

Committee Member Comments & Questions were as follows:

- In response to a question from the Committee, the delegation noted that 20 individuals in the City of Vernon have received their Permanent Residency status to date.
- The delegation clarified that the vast majority of recommended applicants were already residing within the City. The last intake period had over 50% of applications from abroad.
- Of the 132 applications received, 31 percent of the applicants have not yet arrived. Due to COVID-19, there are some individuals who have applications in progress from the previous stream in early 2021.
 - 78 applicants were accepted; 30 of which are already residing and working in Vernon.
- A member of the Committee asked if whether students who are training in Vernon for educational reasons could potentially also be settled in Vernon through the program.
 - In response the delegation noted there is an international exemption provision that students can apply for which does allow for an easier acceptance given that as a student, they would already have the necessary Canadian educational credentials satisfied.

- It was discussed that the engineering program at the British Columbia Okanagan Campus (UBCO) is 4 years and most of the registered students are living and working in Vernon while completing their training.
- The delegation clarified that presently, the UBCO falls outside the circle of accredited educational institutions that are partners in the program.
- Staff noted that the program is an excellent opportunity and could potentially be explored as a future possibility; particularly since growing the community and strengthening local businesses ties into Vernon's Official Community Plan.

Staff thanked the delegation for his presentation and welcomed panelist, J. Weir.

J. Weir, Immigration Services, Registered Canadian Immigration Consultant:

- Staffing is the number one issue for businesses in Vernon. Five years ago, people were hesitant to use immigration-based staffing because the feeling was that it took a long time.
- Due to economic challenges, and workforce shrinkage issues caused by an aging population, COVID-19, and an extremely competitive market, there are serious staffing shortages throughout the Okanagan.
- The pandemic closed immigration channels and limited entry into Canada / Vernon to only a very small / select group of applicants.

Challenges with Hiring Foreign Labour & Sponsorship:

- Housing affordability and availability;
- Navigating the immigration process is both onerous and complicated; and
- Attracting small businesses to sponsor newcomers.

To bring a person to Canada as a worker from another country the sponsor must provide proof that bringing in an applicant from outside Canada **will not** negatively impact the local labour market. At the start of the process, a detailed Labour Impact Assessment (LIA) needs to be completed by the sponsoring party.

Challenges Facing Small Business Owners who are Interested in Pursuing Foreign Talent:

- **How to Start** - There are a multitude of job boards available around the world. Small employers have no idea where to begin and initiating the process is daunting.
- **Retaining Talent in the Community** - Newcomers who want to come to Canada think Canada first, then BC, but Vernon is not a focal point. The City of Vernon and small business owners need to promote the “**Vernon Advantage**”.
- **Marketing Vernon** - Due to COVID-19, immigration applicants are looking for wide-open spaces, opportunities to build a future, and having work / life balance. The delegation noted that the City of Vernon successfully checks all those boxes and is sometimes even referred to as the “the Mediterranean of Canada” in terms of all the amenities that Vernon has to offer.
- **Challenges with Undertaking the Immigration Process** – There are stringent financial and educational requirements for an applicant to come to Canada. Even though applicants might be highly trained in their origin country, they may not meet the immigration specifications set out by the Government of Canada.
- **Long-Term Commitment Required** - Bringing new talent from outside of Canada must be a long-term commitment on part of the business sponsor and the community at large.

Questions / Comments posed by the Committee were as follows:

- In response to a question from the Committee, the delegation noted that the City can actively and successfully advertise “Vernon” and its merits overseas and that the internet alone is **not** the only available tool to do so.
 - The delegation noted that he actively promotes businesses and Vernon while overseas; however, during COVID-19 international travel has been difficult given the various travel restrictions imposed.

Is there a particular stream or path that makes it easier for newcomers to enter Canada?

- The delegation clarified that the success of an application is based purely on a point structure system. Some of the items taken into consideration when weighing a potential candidate's application are as follows:
 - **Community Involvement** - Does the applicant have connections already in the area?
 - **Education** – Does the application meet the requirements?
 - **Sponsoring Employer Commitment** – Does the applicant have sponsorship?
 - **Labour Market Impact Assessment (LIMA)** – Does the LIMA substantiate / support the immigration request?
 - **Processing Times** – The processing times for newcomer applications are growing increasingly longer. It is a two to three-year commitment for a small business owner to sponsor a foreign worker; and all applications must strictly adhere to the prescribed criteria.

Is it Difficult for an Entrepreneur to Enter Canada?

- Unfortunately, at the present, it is very difficult for entrepreneurs to immigrate to Canada.
- To be successful in entering the country using the entrepreneurial stream, an applicant would have to plan in advance and demonstrate financial stability.
- As an entrepreneur, applicants who have the right skill sets must also be formally nominated and sponsored.
- There is a pent-up demand for entrepreneurs, and potentially a group of people who could feasibly be interested in pursuing sponsorship; however, the process is time consuming, lengthy and adheres to some more stringent stipulations than even those required within the standard stream. Candidates generally find the protracted waiting period and application / qualification process either too cumbersome or discouraging to pursue.

How Can the City of Vernon Navigate the Immigration System to Fill Identified Employment Gaps?

- The delegation noted that being connected to pre-qualified applicants seeking employment in Vernon is critical.
- Canadian Immigration programs will continue to adapt and grow as the Federal Government has begun to focus more on immigration; Vernon could take steps to become more engaged.
- When people are brought into Canada as a worker their permit is based on the specific job offer they received. Their permit as an “application” remains as long as the job offer is in place.
 - If the sponsored job is lost the candidate needs to reapply for a new sponsor. The City could engage with sponsors and help to develop connections / resources to assist with seasonal workers ending their term and then obtaining employment in another local industry.
 - Spouses travelling with a sponsored worker have an open work permit but for only the community in which they reside. The City of Vernon could develop a local pool of willing small business owners to assist in making connections with newcomers and their families.

Are there Helpful Immigration Resources that Can be Shared Online?

- The delegation noted that it is very difficult to offer immigration advice online. It is always best practice to engage the services of a professionally accredited organization, i.e., registered consultant or lawyer.
- Recommending people to accredited programs or professionals is the best option and it is critically important to have a trusted resource to gatekeep and offer unbiased direction.
- Some municipalities opt to hire experts on retainer to assist with inquiries received, i.e., retired Canadian Government Employees who are trained to navigate the nuisances of the Labour Market Impact Assessment (LIMA) and provide guidance.

- **How Can the City of Vernon Assist Local Business Owners in Hiring Foreign Workers?**

The delegation recommended that the City explore engaging experienced immigration consultants. The consultants would serve as “facilitators” to help businesses, monitor job boards and give small business owners an idea of where best to post openings to tap into foreign markets and attract workers.

Businesses need to make nominations and then they are vetted by admissibility. Jobs need to be offered 12 months per year (not seasonal). There are 10 different National Occupation Codes (NOC) An immigrant must know their NOC code that correlates with their job for a visa application. Employers need to understand what they need in terms of requirements and frame their thinking accordingly.

The delegation noted that small business owners typically do not have time or resources to navigate the immigration process on their own; it takes a firm commitment of at least 6 - 8 months.

Some countries have far longer processing times for workers to obtain work visas. To combat the lag time, local businesses have gotten creative and have begun training via Zoom to get their new employees trained prior to arrival.

- Staff clarified for members of the Committee that before actions are taken, detailed conversations would need to occur with interested small business owners in Vernon who would be willing to commit to the program re: sponsorship.

- **International Mobility Francophone Program (Inquiry):**

The delegation clarified the following in response to a question from the Committee:

- The International Mobility Francophone Program falls within the “Canadian Interest Program”. The caveat is that any candidates must have to have the ability to operate in English to be landed in Vernon.
- The program targets positions in higher skill levels. Skilled workers can be attracted and recruited from French speaking countries (i.e., Belgium, France, Switzerland, and some African Countries).

Suggested Next Steps to Bring Forward to the Local Immigration Partnership Council (LIPC) Subcommittee:

The delegation recommended the following:

1. **Needs Assessment** - Poll the local businesses and do a needs assessment. The actions and assistance of the City of Vernon (CoV) can then be guided by the results of the assessment.
2. **Current Situation vs. Long-Term** – The CoV should proceed with non-bias and retain someone accredited to act as a knowledge transfer facilitator to help answer questions and guide applicants.
3. **Employee Retention** - There is a huge population of people who are already in Vernon doing seasonal work, if there was a way to tap into that and meet them early on in their local employment engagement, encourage them to plan for their future (instead of thinking only short-term), applicants could be feasibly then transitioned from their short-term working visa to a more permanent position within the community.
4. **Connect Seasonal Foreign Employees with the Business Community** - If foreign workers knew what to do when they arrived, they could start early (when they already have a short-term seasonal offer) and not wait 6 months down the road to seek continued employment when they only have 2 months left on their visa.
5. **Local Key Contact (CoV)** – Consider having a dedicated staff member who deals with approved candidates and serves as a facilitator between newcomers and local businesses.
6. **Foster Synergetic Links to Colleges and Universities** – Work to coordinate, be proactive and market “The Vernon Advantage” to foreign students.
 - **Be Proactive** - Be more targeted in how recruitment works and knowledgeable with how short-term foreign workers can be retained.
 - **Recruit in Targeted Areas** – Have a presence at prominent immigration fairs in Europe. Strike partnerships with small businesses in Vernon and have former successful applicants of the program write testimonials as a straightforward way to sell the community.

The Chair thanked the two panelists for their presentations and clarified that City of Vernon staff will continue to explore connections and pursue partnerships in support of this initiative.

Staff noted that they will pursue discussions at upcoming immigration shows, continue to network and will come back to the Economic Development Advisory Committee with a further update on this topic.

DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting will be at the call of the Chair.

ADJOURNMENT

Moved by J. Stasuk, and seconded by C. Wilson.

THAT the Economic Development Advisory Committee of Thursday, January 20, 2022, be adjourned.

CARRIED

The meeting of the Economic Development Advisory Committee adjourned at 6:01 PM.

CERTIFIED CORRECT:



Victor S. Cummings