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High-skilled immigrants pursued to boost Michigan economy

*KIM KOZLOWSKI**/ The Detroit News*

Gov. Rick Snyder has launched an initiative to attract more foreign investors and entrepreneurs to bring their talent, ideas and business plans to help boost the state's economy.

Known as Global Michigan, the effort is modeled on a program the governor created while he was in Ann Arbor that he now wants to expand on a state level. Experts say it is a pioneering effort in the United States, one that follows similar attempts in other nations.

"He has long been interested in this topic and sees the value foreign nationals can play in the new economy," said Amy Cell, senior vice president of talent enhancement, at the Michigan Economic Development Corp.

The agency is helping to lead the effort.

"This is looking at what is really the best thing for Michigan when you look at the types of opportunities that can come about from immigrants, and the contributions they make in a community."

Elected on the heels of the state's decade-long recession, Snyder has included Global Michigan in his strategic — and sometimes controversial — plan to get the state back on the path to prosperity.

New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg even weighed in on immigrants as a way for Detroit to rebuild and to address the nation's immigration issues when he suggested that all people wanting to come to America first move to the Motor City for a few years.

Snyder's plan is not aimed at bringing every immigrant to the state. Instead, he hopes to attract highly skilled immigrants and investors to synergize the economy.

So far, leaders of the initiative have enlisted dozens of public and private organizations, such as businesses, associations, local economic development agencies, advocacy groups and universities, to help build and execute Global Michigan, officials say.

Committees have been formed to address many issues such as attraction of talent, retention of international students and working to get more foreign nationals into programs that offer visas for those who invest in state businesses with jobs for Americans.

Diversification has been touted as one way to grow the state economy beyond the automotive industry.

But attracting foreign nationals would add another strategy to the state's arsenal, said Ron Perry, who was a volunteer in a similar program sponsored by economic development group Ann Arbor SPARK while Snyder was board chairman.

"We need to be pushing on all cylinders in this state to improve, diversify and enhance the economy," Perry

said.

"If we can create a more immigrant friendly community, attract non-Americans to come to Michigan and provide them with the environment to take their knowledge, education, great ideas and entrepreneurial spirit, and translate that into helping them create companies, then we will create another economic enhancement strategy here that will bring Michigan back and beyond the low that it's been at for so long."

Some say keep focus here

Some are opposed to the tactic.

"It would be nice if the governor focused more on suffering American citizens than people who aren't even in the country," said William Gheen of Americans for Legal Immigration, a national group based on the Web at alipac.us. "If he hasn't noticed, this country is falling apart economically and millions of Americans are suffering in ways unprecedented since the Great Depression."

Proponents, however, say several studies have shown that foreign nationals have had an impact on job creation, innovation and the economy.

A 2007 Duke University study, for instance, noted that at least one key founder in 25.3 percent of all engineering and technology companies established in the U.S. was foreign born.

Those companies, collectively, were responsible for generating more than \$52 billion in sales in 2005 and creating nearly 450,000 jobs as of 2005, the study added.

Another study showed that one-fourth of all patents involved at least one person born abroad.

"Bringing in more talented and skilled immigrants will lead to job opportunity and growth for the state; there is evidence to support that," said Jeanne Batalova, a policy analyst at the Migration Policy Institute.

Using full potential is key

Even though countries such as Canada and Australia have made attracting foreign nationals a policy to enhance their economies, Batalova said no other U.S. state has embraced the concept as part of an economic development plan.

"(Michigan's) governor is a pioneer in this field," Batalova said. "It seems like he took a page from what other countries are doing."

The approach needs to be three-pronged, she said. It needs to work at retaining foreign nationals graduating from area universities by connecting them to employers and to helping them start a business; attracting skilled immigrants either from abroad or from other states; and also looking for foreign-born nationals who are already here but underutilized.

The last strategy is one that is often overlooked, and many states are allowing this "brain waste," a phenomenon detailed in a study by the Migration Policy Institute showing a fifth of all U.S. immigrants have degrees but are working in jobs considerably below their qualifications, such as the many taxi drivers who have higher educational credentials.

"Everyone is trying to bring the talent in but once people are there, are they using their full potential?" Batalova said.

While some would argue that immigrants would be taking jobs from local residents, others argue that some of the nation's visa policies pose major obstacles for foreign nationals with student visas who graduate and want to stay in the United States.

John Yu-hsien Chang recently earned his master's degree in aerospace engineering from the University of

Michigan and started a business in Ann Arbor with American and Canadian colleagues.

The business folded a few months ago, but had it been successful, Chang's student visa was about to expire and he was scheduled to go back to Taiwan. His business co-founders could have hired him as an employee, but Chang wasn't sure that would have worked.

"No matter how successful the business was, I would have had to gone back to my home country," said Chang. "We would really appreciate if there were more visa options."

Track record in Michigan

Despite the national immigration problems, some say the state needs to move forward with the Global Michigan concept.

"What helped us a century ago to be the most prosperous region for middle class people in the world for the better part of the century was the kind of industrial innovation, energy and work ethic that characterized Michigan, and that included Detroit," said Steve Tobocman, director of Global Detroit, a similar effort.

"At that time we were about one-third foreign born and a lot of the auto pioneers came from all over the world to participate in Detroit," Tobocman said.

"If you look at all the indicators of the 21st century, it's going to be talent and that kind of entrepreneurial spirit — and a lot of those traits are correlated with the immigrant population."

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