

Cochrane District immigration focus of study

By Don Curry

A University of Guelph immigration research report focusing on Cochrane District reinforces the direction of the Northeastern Ontario Immigration Project.

About to be released, the report by School of Environmental Design and Rural Development students Bakhtawar Khan and Brianne Labute, supervised by project director Dr. Wayne Caldwell, was funded by the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs. The pair travelled to Timmins and Cochrane this summer and conducted focus groups with immigrants and seven interviews with people involved in immigration, including Martine Beaulieu, chair of the Cochrane Immigrant Employers' Council, and Julie Joncas, a council member and executive director of the Far Northeast Training Board.

An advance copy of the 29-page report notes the percentage of immigrants compared to the total population in Cochrane District has been in decline. In 1996 it was 3.8%, 3.4% in 2001, 3.2% in 2006 and 2.9% in 2011. However they note the 2011 statistics are from the National Household Survey, which had a 30.3% non-response rate in Cochrane District. Other studies have shown that immigrants were under-counted in smaller census areas in 2011 due to the long form census no longer being compulsory. As of 2011 Cochrane District had a population of 78,645.

The report's recommendations are:

1. Tap in to existing networks of immigrants to increase newcomer engagement;
2. Continue to build relationships with employment services in urban centres to attract the right talent for jobs available in Northern Ontario;
3. Replicate the racism study conducted in Timmins in 2004 to explore community perceptions and compare trends over time;
4. Involve immigrants in leadership roles associated with immigration efforts to ensure that their needs are being met;
5. Use the Timmins & District Multicultural Centre as a welcoming and social space for immigrants;
6. Use video conferencing technology such as Skype to help immigrants in rural and remote areas access settlement services online;
7. Utilize the Timmins Public Library to host immigration-related events;
8. Help employers and communities become "immigrant ready" through a series of trainings, workshops and community events.

The report's purpose was to explore current immigration efforts in Cochrane District. It will be combined with reports from three other Ontario counties to create a toolkit of best practices pertaining to immigrant attraction and retention in rural areas.

The ministry funded a similar project a number of years ago, when the immigration initiatives in the municipalities of North Bay, Brockville and Chatham-Ken were profiled.

Don Curry is the executive director of the North Bay & District Multicultural Centre.