

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ADVISORY COUNCIL**MINUTES****JUNE 10, 2016**

- PRESENT:** Tim Bernier, Chris Carley, Brad Hosmer, Bill Norton, and Claudia Walker
- ABSENT:** Councilor Champlin, Stephen Heavener, Councilor Keach, Councilor Todd, and John Hoyt
- STAFF:** Carlos Baía, Deputy City Manager - Development
Matthew Walsh, Director of Redevelopment, Downtown Services, and Special Projects
Donna Muir, Administrative Assistant
- GUESTS:** James Snodgrass and Joan Gilmore, Second Start

1. Discussion of Welcoming Concord Resolution:

Chairman Carley stated that EDAC is currently working on a revised Report to the Mayor on Business Development specifically concerning the Welcoming Concord resolution; a draft of his revised report and comments from Councilor Champlin was circulated via email to EDAC members, recommending that the City become a Welcoming Community. He explained that at this point, EDAC is looking to continue its discussion and finalize the report

Mr. Bernier indicated that he has had the opportunity to do some research on the Welcoming Communities initiative and thinks that the issues regarding immigrants and refugees faced by communities will cost money. He has some real concerns and thinks discussions need to take place. He doesn't see where there is any economic benefit to the City, but does see a tremendous risk. He is not in favor of recommending this resolution. He opined that working with refugees and asylum seekers is a humanitarian effort that needs to be dealt with as such and too often that gets mixed in with other immigration topics and does more harm than good. He believes that adopting this initiative would open the City up to tremendous risks economically.

Ms. Walker asked if Mr. Bernier would spell out what those issues are. Mr. Bernier responded that there are obligations under the law to provide for financial assistance and personnel to assist multilingual immigrants. What appears to be happening is that there are organizations that are paid to bring in refugees and these organizations are paid per refugee. He has found nine separate organizations that bring refugees into the United States, and these organizations have about 350 subsidiaries. He has found that some communities have begun to feel a financial burden as many refugees do not leave once they are in a community.

Ms. Walker asked if these communities are connected to the Welcoming Communities initiative. Mr. Bernier replied that he wasn't able to figure out what cities are part of the initiative or ascertain what the Welcoming Communities initiative was trying to accomplish. His impression is that it is difficult to tie the initiative to economic development; why wouldn't the City work directly with businesses to help fill jobs instead. Mr. Norton stated that he shares many of Mr. Bernier's thoughts and has seen this happening in Lewiston, Maine. Lewiston has a huge burden of immigrants. Immigration includes a wide spectrum from PhDs to unskilled non-English speaking individuals. From an economic development perspective, we want to have skilled individuals, but that is not the entire gamut of immigrants that come into a community. Concord doesn't have the manufacturing/assembly type jobs; instead we have government agencies, lawyers, and nonprofits. He isn't sure

how people immigrate into this type of economy. It might be helpful if the state was willing to do training programs beyond kindergarten through grade 12. Mr. Norton asked whether the City has talked about the impact of immigrants/refugees have had with the City's Human Services Department. Mr. Baía estimated that the refugee population uses less than ten percent of the City's services.

Mr. Bernier expressed that refugees are not a majority of the residents in Concord either. He asked what happens when the numbers rise from three percent of the population to more. What is the percentage of those refugees who are using the City's services, and what if that number doubles? Ms. Walker asked if this is what happens when communities become a part of the Welcoming Communities initiative. Mr. Bernier replied that it could.

Mr. Bernier said that the definition of refugee has changed and it is easy to meet the thresholds now. What it costs the taxpayers to bring one refugee into the United States could help 50 people in their own countries. There needs to be a discussion; we are talking about economic development, not humanitarian efforts. He doesn't believe it is our place here in EDAC to be discussing immigration; it is an unreasonable responsibility.

Ms. Walker asked Mr. Norton why he thought there were so many immigrants in Lewiston, Maine. Mr. Norton explained it was because Lewiston has a surplus of housing. Manchester had many unskilled immigrants who worked at a car parts manufacturer, which employed 545 people. That company has since left Manchester, and now they have the refugees without the jobs. In Concord, we don't have those types of manufacturing/assembly jobs. We need to ask our largest employers to see the types of skills they are looking for. Concord also doesn't have a 20 percent vacancy rate.

Mr. Carley stated that he didn't interpret the initiative as an invitation for people to come here. Mr. Snodgrass explained that the initiative is a statement that we welcome people of all cultures and races. Mr. Bernier thinks that we say we are welcoming every day; his problem is associating with any organization, because an organization can change its mission and values at any time. Why can't we come up with our own statement rather than associating with a movement or organization. Mr. Bernier restated that he has concerns with this particular organization. We don't have to do something with this, we can create our own skilled workforce for the jobs we currently have. Ms. Walker said that she saw the initiative differently; she saw it as a statement of who we are, not as an open invitation, but as a statement of acceptance. Mr. Carley said that he tended to read the proposal the same way and as an endorsement of the Welcoming Communities initiative, as well as for other organizations that are doing the same.

Mr. Hosmer stated that it seems that we don't have much control over the bulk of the refugees that are resettled; it is the federal government that decides. He doesn't see this initiative creating a new burden. He said that he did some checking on his own to see what the YMCA is doing. They currently have some camp programs that would be applicable to immigrant populations, if the YMCA was more active in their outreach. He would be in favor of the proposal and felt that we could always unjoin if the initiative becomes undesirable. He hasn't heard anything in these discussions that would make our obligations worse. As far as attracting high quality workers, the more welcoming we are better opportunities are open. Immigrants who have been here ten years are making big impact on our community.

Mr. Norton said that we are the Economic Development Advisory Council and we need to recommend items that are specific to economic development. City Council will be the adopters of this initiative and will see the points we are making regarding the need for skilled and educated workers.

Mr. Hosmer explained that if you are someone who has money and skills and are looking to move into a new community, having adopted this initiative would put the City of Concord a step above other communities and would let these individuals know that we are a welcoming community.

Mr. Bernier reiterated that he still has a number of concerns and disagrees with the initiative. He thinks that the federal government doesn't have a good policy as to how to distribute refugees and feels that adding a section to the Report to the Mayor on Business Development is not the way to go and thinks that we can be welcoming without affiliating ourselves with an organization.

Mr. Hosmer opined that the federal immigration policy is a mess and some communities being flooded with refugees, and this initiative appears to be trying to make the best of a situation. It seems to him that a welcoming approach is a reasonable good way to deal with this issue.

Mr. Carley stated that he was inclined to agree and doesn't see how it puts us at risk. Why not take the approach that immigrants offer potential more than create burdens. Regardless of the adoption of this initiative there will be immigrants/refugees in this community.

Mr. Norton moved to endorse the Welcoming Communities initiative to City Council as an addendum to EDAC's Report to the Mayor on Business Development. Ms. Walker seconded the motion. The vote to endorse was 4-1 with Mr. Bernier voting against the endorsement.

2. Other Business:

EDAC discussed the Economic Development plan for the City. Mr. Baía was asked about the Mayor's plan for the Economic Development Advisory Council. He responded that the Mayor had previously spoken about ad-hoc strike forces in the future to discuss and advise on various issues surrounding economic development, but nothing definitive has been done specific to this as yet.

Mr. Baía stated that City Council approved the new Economic Development position with funds budgeted to include salary, travel, and marketing for Fiscal Year 2017.

3. Adjournment:

The meeting adjourned at 8:45 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Donna Muir