



Reforms crucial to a more prosperous region and province

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COMMENTARY

For the first time in our province's history, New Brunswick can boast of having more than 800,000 residents. Premier Blaine Higgs has set an ambitious goal of growing the population to one million people by 2040, and the business community would like to see our province achieve it. That is why our Chamber and others across New Brunswick are pushing for effective immigration reforms at the federal and provincial levels.

The rapid increase in New Brunswick's population has inspired both excitement and frustration in our region's business community.

The excitement comes from knowing how critically important immigration is to addressing labour shortages and growing New Brunswick's economy. The frustration comes from seeing firsthand how many obstacles still stand in the way.

Economist David Campbell of Jupia Consultants Inc. has crunched the data to put New Brunswick's immigration challenge in perspective. More than 120,000 New Brunswickers are expected to leave the workforce by 2040, while another 70,000 jobs will need to be created to meet the demands of our province's expanding economy. This means New Brunswick will need at least 190,000 new workers over the next 18 years across all economic sectors. Many of these jobs will need to be filled by attracting people to New Brunswick.

Over the past five years, the number of landed immigrants in the provincial workforce has grown by 15,600 people, while the number of new permanent resident admissions is expected to top 8,000 this year – a figure equivalent to one per cent of New Brunswick's total population. Locally, the City of Saint John recently released its 10-year strategic plan which sets a target of growing the number of residents here by 15,000 by 2032.

So the needle is moving in the right direction.

Unfortunately, it isn't moving fast enough – and in the opinion of many in business and political circles, it won't until the federal and provincial governments reduce bureaucratic barriers to skilled immigration.

Most immigration policymaking falls under federal jurisdiction. Our Chamber would like to see this change, because provincial legislators tend to be more nimble and closer to the real needs of New Brunswick businesses. The next round of federal-provincial immigration talks should be premised on the idea that New Brunswickers are in the best position to set immigration requirements for workers hoping to fill New Brunswick jobs.

The provincial government also needs to pick up its game, though, because the immigration programs that are under its control are in need of strategic revision.

New Brunswick has the capacity to fast-track nominees for permanent residency through two streams of provincial nominee programs. One stream focuses on immigration for employment and the other on business and investor-class immigrants. The provincial government sets its own criteria for both streams, and a number of these criteria need to be loosened or eliminated.

To cite just a few examples, age restrictions as well as language testing requirements for native English speakers, such as United States and United Kingdom applicants, plus some truly obtuse rules regarding whether a prospective immigrant's past education and job experience line up with the position they are immigrating to fill. These restrictions do not serve the public interest.

We should also explore specific streams created for New Brunswick that can help fill jobs and improve labour market conditions, these could include streams for international students, temporary workers and their spouses. We know people stay for families which helps with retention, perhaps an immigration class of relatives of applicants who are already here.

New Brunswick businesses are in the best position to determine who is capable of filling vacant New Brunswick jobs. It's time to update the provincial nominee program criteria by dropping the age restrictions and language testing requirements and trusting businesses to understand who they are hiring and why.

2040 may seem like a distant deadline for population growth, but businesses in our region are already feeling the contraction of the provincial labour force as experienced employees and skilled managers retire. We need officials at the federal and provincial levels who are prepared to facilitate the arrival of New Brunswick's next generation of permanent resident workers, professionals, and business investors.

New Brunswick ranks eighth among the 10 provinces for permanent residency admissions when the numbers are adjusted for population size. Let's open up a dialogue with the federal government on placing more power over immigration in provincial hands and making the provincial nominee program more responsive to the changing needs of New Brunswick businesses and our economy as a whole.

We are once again a growing province. We cannot afford to disqualify prospective immigrants who have the potential to make great contributions to New Brunswick's economy and society.

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