

Community Leadership Foundation 2009 – White Paper

“Providing Immigration Access to the Quad Cities – How Do We Get Them Here?”

In December 2008, the Quad City Community Leadership class was presented with an issue – How can we improve our community through immigration access? It has become vital that our region keep pace with similar communities working to diversify and provide economic opportunities through growth of immigrant populations, and in order to do so we must examine innovative ways to sustain our current immigrant population and appeal to prospective immigrants traveling to the United States. Specifically, we chose to address barriers to physical transportation and how providing ease of access may encourage immigrant growth in the region.

One of the most powerful immigration movements in the Quad Cities began with the construction of the first railroad bridge across the Mississippi River in 1856. Spanning from Rock Island to Davenport across the Arsenal Island, the bridge provided prospective immigrants with rail access west of the Mississippi River, and had a major impact on economic development and growth to the region. Immigrants of Swedish, Belgian, and German descent embarked upon the area because of rapid growth in the industrial, manufacturing, and masonry fields. The situation today is somewhat different in that opportunities for immigrant populations entering the United States are boundless. Our Country’s transportation network is comprehensive and travel between geographic areas is much easier than in the past. Today’s immigrants appear to be of Vietnamese, Mexican, and Indian descent and are relocating based on growth in medical, hospitality, and agricultural industries. These populations are no longer limited by one or two

modes of transportation, but have access to travel via air, rail, intercity bus, and the personal vehicle.

Being a Midwestern community, physical modes of transportation will play an important role in making the Quad Cities an appealing and economically feasible destination for immigrant populations. Upon entering the United States, travel to the Midwest often requires a more costly or lengthy trip as opposed to coastal or border communities. The Quad Cities is fortunate in that a wide variety of transportation alternatives are still available. Among them is the Quad City International Airport, which provides non-stop travel to eight cities via five airlines. In regards to highway travel, the area has easy access to interstate systems such as I-80, I-280, I-74, and I-88, and is located just hours from Metropolitan areas such as Chicago, Minneapolis, and St. Louis. However, it cannot be assumed that immigrants traveling to the United States will have access to a personal vehicle, particularly those traveling from locations overseas. Companies such as Burlington Trailways and Greyhound Bus Lines attempt to bridge this gap by offering low-cost intercity bus trips to and from locations throughout the Midwest and connections throughout the country. Although there is an ongoing initiative to bring passenger rail service directly to the Quad Cities, Burlington Trailways also offers connecting trips to and from Galesburg, the region's closest Amtrak station.

In addition to the availability of transportation networks, it is important to also recognize that some factors unrelated to transportation will undoubtedly play a role in the attractiveness of our community to prospective immigrants. For example, the availability of employment and employment training, cultural centers, language barriers, and marketing will

have a role in determining whether or not a particular immigrant wishes to relocate to the Quad Cities, regardless of the ease of transportation access. Similarly, the age, education, income, and proximity of the immigrant population we choose to attract will have a large impact on which modes of transportation to improve.

After considering these variables, a broad-based approach to attracting immigrants via transportation will rely on public outreach and cost-effective programs. It is likely that prospective immigrants may have access to our region, but feel they are unable to do so because they are unaware of their options. Partnerships between cultural centers, human service agencies, and advertising outlets will be necessary to provide needed information, as well as to translate transportation alternatives in the correct language. In addition, programs to reduce the cost of transportation will be necessary to provide ease of access to immigrant populations. Employer incentives to reduce airline, bus, or rail fares may provide the needed incentive for immigrants to choose the Quad Cities as their destination.

It's important to remember that the railroad bridge built in 1856 was meant to provide access west of the Mississippi River, and yet contributed to one of the Quad Cities' largest immigration movements in history. Even though westward opportunities were possible, immigrants realized what the Quad Cities had to offer and chose to stay. Similar to today's immigrant population, if we can provide affordable, flexible, and well-marketed transportation options, our community will sell itself. Ease of access is necessary because it initiates travel to our region, but diversity and cultural growth will continue based on the spirit of our community.

Appendix A – Authors

1. Matthew Hays – Katz, Huntoon, & Fieweger, PC
mhays@katzlawfirm.com
2. Heath TreHarne – Tree of Life Chiropractic
nuccatree@yahoo.com
3. Fonda VanNattan – Skip – A – Long Child Development Services
fvannattan@skip-a-long.com
4. Chelsey Waterman – Bi-State Regional Commission
cwaterman@bistateonline.org

Appendix B – References

- 1) River Action – www.riveraction.org
- 2) Quad City Development Group – www.quadcities.org
- 3) 2008 Transit Development Plan, Bi-State Regional Commission – www.bistateonline.org
- 4) Quad Cities Tourism & Visitor’s Bureau – www.visitquadcities.com
- 5) 2000 Census Data – www.census.gov