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Newcomers hold key to Sudbury's future - report



By [Jim Moodie](#), The Sudbury Star

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Sudbury is uniquely positioned to build its economic base through an influx of people from other countries and from First Nations in the North, according to a recent study.

The paper, produced jointly through the Northern Ontario Policy Institute and Northern Ontario Workforce Planning Boards, argues the Nickel City isn't just a regional leader when it comes to embracing natives and newcomers, but even stands out on a national scale.

Sudbury has the highest number of newcomers per capita compared to other census districts in Northern Ontario, the report notes.

More remarkable, it has the highest "human capital index" -- the ability to develop and utilize talent -- for Indigenous and newcomer populations "not only in all of Northern Ontario, but also provincially and nationally."

Like many parts of the region, Sudbury faces pressures from an aging population, youth outmigration and fewer jobs in resource industries.

But the recent report -- part of a series analyzing human capital in northern cities -- shows the picture is much rosier for this community than many might have assumed.

"It seems like the good news stories are the hardest ones for people to believe," said Charles Cirtwill, president of the Northern Policy Institute. "If you look at numbers for Northern Ontario as a whole, it's true that we have a population and industries in decline, but when you break it out and start looking at the economic regions or individual districts, as this paper does, you start to see a very different story."

Greater Sudbury has a few strong suits, he said, "particularly in areas around Indigenous peoples, which I have to admit I was pleased by, because not everyone is particularly successful in finding a way to make Western education work for those communities," he said. "But it seems Sudbury has found that formula."

A lot of that has to do with the city's post-secondary schools and programs. Sudbury counts a robust academic and skills-training sector, so much so that the report authors suggest education may be "the new mining" for the city.

"Sudbury stands out in terms of overall educational levels, and particularly of its Indigenous population," said Cirtwill. "We're talking about 61 per cent of the Indigenous population in Sudbury having a diploma or degree, whereas the national average is 48 per cent."

Despite these positive trends, the city's population is expected to remain largely constant over the next couple of decades, with many citizens retiring and the labour force declining by 14 per cent.

With that in mind, the report argues the city should do more to market itself as a destination for First Nations students and professionals, as well as for immigrants who have landed initially in big urban centres.

"With significant numbers of unemployed and underemployed new Canadians in the Greater Toronto Area, there is a real opportunity for Greater Sudbury to address its population challenges by playing to its demonstrated strength in supporting immigrant success," the report states.

"The North, and in particular the northeast, has some real potential for secondary migration," said Cirtwill. "We know there's a labour shortage and opportunities here for low- and medium-skilled workers that aren't necessarily available in communities in southern Ontario."

Sudbury can offer new arrivals a range of jobs -- from truck driver and warehouse worker to retail clerk and administration assistant -- he said, as well as opportunities for entrepreneurs wanting to run their own business.

"There are companies where the owners are getting to the point where they're looking to cash out," he said. "The reality is you can buy a profitable business for considerably less up front than you can in southern Ontario, and you've got a lower cost of living."

Many Northern communities focus on attracting doctors and other highly educated professionals, "forgetting the historical storyline that for generation after generation, it was people who were lower-skilled who moved to a place that had an opportunity, and were prepared to work and earn a living and sustain their family," Cirtwill noted. "And it was the next generation that moved into those high-paying jobs."

The challenge for Sudbury -- like many other communities -- is that many will be leaving the workforce in coming years.

"If we want a tax base that is going to allow us to pay for the health services that those folks will want in the final years of their life, we're going to have to find people to replace them," said Cirtwill. "And we're going to have to find people to deliver those services."

But the Nickel City is in a better position than many to deal with that challenge, the report contends, since it is already doing a good job of welcoming and training First Nations people -- whose numbers are expected to climb by nearly a third in the next two-dozen years -- and boasts human capital indices for immigrants that are "higher than in Ontario and Canada, and notably higher than the total working-age population across all jurisdictions."

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