

**MANITOBA RURAL IMMIGRATION
COMMUNITY CASE STUDIES**

Portage la Prairie

RDI Working Paper #2005-6

April 2005

Rural Development Institute, Brandon University

Brandon University established the Rural Development Institute in 1989 as an academic research centre and a leading source of information on issues affecting rural communities in Western Canada and elsewhere.



RDI functions as a not-for-profit research and development organization designed to promote, facilitate, coordinate, initiate and conduct multi-disciplinary academic and applied research on rural issues. The Institute provides an interface between academic research efforts and the community by acting as a conduit of rural research information and by facilitating community involvement in rural development. RDI projects are characterized by cooperative and collaborative efforts of multi-stakeholders.

The Institute has diverse research affiliations, and multiple community and government linkages related to its rural development mandate. RDI disseminates information to a variety of constituents and stakeholders and makes research information and results widely available to the public either in printed form or by means of public lectures, seminars, workshops and conferences.

For more information, please visit www.brandonu.ca/rdi.

**MANITOBA RURAL IMMIGRATION
COMMUNITY CASE STUDIES**

Portage la Prairie

RDI Working Paper #2005-6

April 2005

**Rural Development Institute
Brandon University
Brandon, Manitoba R7A 6A9
Canada**

Prepared by:
Ray Silvius, M.A.

RDI would like to thank Citizenship and Immigration Canada for financial support, Manitoba Labour and Immigration for continued assistance and feedback, and all community members and immigrant subjects who provided invaluable information and commentary. The author would like to thank the RDI team for helpful commentary, editing and assistance with document production.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION TO MANITOBA RURAL IMMIGRATION COMMUNITY CASE STUDIES	2
METHODOLOGY AND PROJECT DEVELOPMENTS	2
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	4
HISTORY AND CONTEXT	4
EXISTING SUPPORTS AND INITIATIVES	4
IMMIGRANTS' PERSPECTIVE	4
CONCLUSION.....	5
<i>Recommendations and Lessons from Portage la Prairie Case Study.....</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Recommended Further Research on Case Study.....</i>	<i>6</i>
INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY.....	7
IMMIGRATION TO PORTAGE LA PRAIRIE - HISTORY AND CONTEXT	8
EXISTING SUPPORTS AND INITIATIVES	10
IMMIGRANTS' PERSPECTIVE: KEY FINDINGS	11
POSITIVE ASPECTS ABOUT THE AREA AND WHAT FACTORED IN CHOOSING AND SETTLING IN PORTAGE LA PRAIRIE	11
NEGATIVE / CHALLENGING ASPECTS ABOUT COMMUNITY / IMMIGRATION PROCESS.....	12
ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS / COMMENTS FROM IMMIGRANTS	12
CONCLUSION	13
CHALLENGES, RECOMMENDATIONS AND OBSERVATIONS	13
RECOMMENDED FURTHER RESEARCH ON CASE STUDY	14
APPENDIX: RESOURCE LIST AND CONTACT INFORMATION.....	15

Introduction to Manitoba Rural Immigration Community Case Studies

The information contained in this report is part of a series of four case studies of community/regional immigration initiatives in Manitoba. Sponsored by Citizenship and Immigration Canada, these case studies were undertaken with the understanding that the findings from four diverse community/regional experiences with rural immigration in Manitoba can assist in exposing innovative practices, lessons learned and further considerations for communities wishing to develop strategies for immigrant attraction, settlement and retention.

It needs to be stressed that this and other case studies each offer a snapshot in time, a collection of impressions and commentary on immigration goals, challenges and responses at a particular point on the continuum of attraction, settlement, and retention. As such, findings are historical and impressionistic and meant to prove instructive for further research and policy considerations, facilitate collaboration between communities and government and initiate contact between communities and immigrants, all for the purposes of strengthening efforts directed towards regional immigration, settlement and retention.

Methodology and Project Developments

For the project, four communities/regions were chosen by Manitoba Labour and Immigration (LIM) on the basis of being instructive with regards to processes and initiatives relating to rural immigration. LIM provided contact information for appropriate stakeholders in each community, who via email, phone and/or in person contact offered input/perspective on community immigration processes. Interviews and/or focus groups were arranged with immigrants through local contacts.

The intent in speaking to immigrants was not to gain quantitative data, but rather seek impressions on their immigration experience that may be informative and instructive both to the communities they reside in and others hoping to develop immigration welcoming, settlement and retention strategies. Despite the relatively small numbers of immigrants successfully contacted, vis-à-vis the overall immigrant population of each area, feedback from immigrants should be seen as valuable for the purposes of gauging potential community strengths and weakness in attracting and retaining immigrants and strategies that may be employed for such initiatives.

An initial series of working papers of findings was developed in collaboration with personnel from LIM and the communities being studied. This material was then offered during two sessions in Brandon, Manitoba at the end of April:

- to participants at the Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation-Rural Development Institute (CRRF-RDI) National Rural Think Tank 2005 on the theme of rural immigration; and
- to Manitoba community representatives attending the “Developing a Community Immigration Strategy” seminar held by RDI and LIM at Manitoba’s Rural Forum.

At the latter, representatives from RDI, LIM and the communities involved also presented findings of the study. Further consultation with LIM and the communities in question was sought to develop the document into its present form.

Executive Summary

History and Context

The City of Portage la Prairie decided in 2004 to pursue its own distinctive route in developing knowledge around immigration, as it was interested in promoting business development and recognized the need for both skilled and unskilled labour. In the same year, immigration became one of city council's top priorities, and two City employees researched the matter exhaustively while consulting with experienced people elsewhere in the province and representatives from Manitoba's Provincial Nominee Program (PNP). From the research, it was determined that the City itself could in the initial stages of their immigration strategy provide all services that immigration consultants and settlement services had elsewhere; this would be done through the newly established Portage la Prairie International Agency (PIA). According to Manitoba Labour and Immigration, Portage la Prairie has seen the arrival of 41 immigrants from 1999-2004.

Existing Supports and Initiatives

Some of the specific existing supports identified during the development of this case study include:

Settlement: The PIA acts as a central hub, connecting immigrants to services available in community. It is presently offering a comprehensive newcomer orientation package.

English as a Second Language (ESL): ESL classes are offered through the Central Manitoba Literary Association. Programming includes a volunteer component, funded by Manitoba Labour and Immigration, in which volunteers are trained with the intent that they can match their skills to immigrant language needs, permitting greater diversification in language services offered.

Immigrants' Perspective

During interviews conducted with a number of Portage la Prairie immigrants, immigrants' perspectives on the positive and negative aspects of community living were shared and discussed. The specific comments of these interview participants are summarized below:

Positive Aspects of Living in Community, Pull Factors: Availability of employment; positive impressions of school system (particularly vis-à-vis urban schools); positive impression upon visiting; comprehensiveness of health care; proximity to Winnipeg; and general advantages over urban setting: safety, space, availability/cost of housing and general cost of living.

Negatives Aspects of Living in Community/Immigration Process: Missing larger city and cultural diversity; available jobs don't suit all family members' skills and interests; it is difficult to establish business network; and the idea of shift work foreign to many immigrants.

Conclusion

Given its infancy, it is premature to gauge success of Portage la Prairie's immigration strategy. However, the city's experience to date may prove instructive, as strong leadership was given at the city level and research organized prior to the implementation of an attraction strategy. Consultation with other areas of the province with greater experience in the matter of immigration, as well as Manitoba Labour and Immigration, has assisted Portage la Prairie in developing specific objectives and supports for an immigration strategy they feel will suit their needs.

Recommendations and Lessons from Portage la Prairie Case Study

Undertake a more diversified approach to attraction, support and retention. Portage la Prairie doesn't have the same predominant cultural fits as other areas in the province to attract a stream of immigrants from one predominant non-Anglo ethnic, cultural or linguistic group. Other rural areas in the province may experience similar challenges.

Facilitate a greater number of exploratory visits by prospective immigrants. These visits should be considered a key component of an immigration strategy as they will provide accurate impressions of the city; as well as an understanding of what supports and services are available. Immigrants' assumptions of what constitutes "rural" in Canada and what services/amenities are available may differ drastically from the reality of many rural communities.

Regularized supports, a strong mandate from the City and a consistent point person has lent to a considerable amount of organization in Portage la Prairie's immigration initiatives.

Establish relationships with immigration personnel in Winnipeg. Continuing to do so in Portage la Prairie's case may allow them to attract more immigrants who first landed in Winnipeg. This secondary migration option may be a sensible one for communities uncertain of where to attract from.

Develop a more comprehensive marketing strategy. One contact expressed concern that Portage la Prairie's marketing strategy would not accommodate diverse needs and motivations and wonders what will be done to tell the whole story of the community, not just that of the potato capital of Canada. Instead of an oversimplified message he recommended a more comprehensive picture, promoting the virtues of a small, safe community with affordable housing, a low cost of living, recreational facilities and access to a large cultural centre in Winnipeg.

Ensure that the credibility of the message being given to prospective immigrants is buoyed by what happens in the community as a whole. Further concern was expressed over whether the community was making strides to be welcoming to minorities and the socially marginalized in all aspects of city life, rather than the insistence of this in an immigration marketing message alone.

Recommended Further Research on Case Study

- To determine retention factors for immigrants denied a larger similar cultural community: Is there an immigrant “best fit” for the city?
- How has the proximity to Winnipeg been leveraged to attract immigration? Could this proximity be further utilized?
- Are there further lessons to be learned for programming around immigration in this model? What are the successes/challenges of such an immigration strategy led and orchestrated by the city itself?

Introduction and Methodology

Portage la Prairie is one of the four community/regional case studies under investigation, chosen after being identified by personnel from Manitoba Labour and Immigration as having had a unique city-level response to immigration, from which important lessons and recommendations can be drawn.

For the intended purposes of the case studies, qualitative and impressionistic information was sought directly from those involved in the immigration process. Contact was established and information gathered by phone conversation, email correspondence and/or in person contact from individuals in each community/region who had themselves played important roles in immigration processes to date and/or could recommend further key contacts. It should be noted that due to the time and travel constraints of the project, not all recommended contacts were successfully reached. In some cases, those reached felt they had little relevant information to offer to the project.

Interviews were arranged with immigrants through local contacts. Time constraints, the comfort level of immigrant subjects and language concerns were factored into the determination of interview procedure. Four semi-structured interviews with immigrant subjects were used in the case of Portage la Prairie.

The intent in speaking to immigrants was not to gain quantitative data, but rather to seek impressions on their immigration experience that may be informative and instructive both to the communities they reside in and others hoping to develop immigration welcoming, settlement and retention strategies. Despite the relatively small numbers of immigrants successfully contacted, vis-à-vis the overall immigrant population of the area, due consideration of feedback from immigrants should be seen as valuable for the purposes of gauging potential community strengths and weakness in attracting and retaining immigrants and strategies that may be employed for such initiatives.

The information provided by immigrants and additional community contacts has been summarized and analyzed to present general history, trends and impressions. Further input and recommendations have been sought from community contacts and Manitoba Labour and Immigration, and this document reflects their input.

Immigration to Portage la Prairie - History and Context

Members of Portage la Prairie's City Council had heard about immigration successes elsewhere and took interest in the prospects of immigration for Portage la Prairie. The Portage la Prairie District Chamber of Commerce had been approached by an immigration consulting service from Winkler in 2000/2001. Their services were declined at that time; however, in 2004 the City decided to pursue its own route in developing knowledge around the matter of immigration, as it was interested in promoting business development and recognized the need for both skilled and unskilled labour. City Council then became the champions of immigration in the city, and in 2004 immigration became one of its top priorities. Furthermore, a community international committee reports to council on the matter of immigration.

Two City employees spent much of 2004 researching all aspects of immigration, determining whether available approaches would be effective or ineffective for the City's purposes. The two took a decidedly measured approach, consulting with experienced people in Brandon, Winnipeg, Russell, Winkler and Steinbach, while providing information and progress reports to council. They also had close contact with representatives from the Manitoba Provincial Nominee Program (PNP) to have a better understanding of the program in order to inform businesses and immigrants of all options.

Stemming from the research was the determination that the City itself, via the Portage la Prairie International Agency (PIA), could provide all the services in the initial stages of their immigration strategy that immigration consultants and settlement services had elsewhere. The aim of the immigration strategy is to first develop and account for appropriate services in advance, prior to large numbers of immigrant arrivals. The PIA acts as the central hub that can connect immigrants to services available in the community and is presently a subset of the Economic and Community Development department.

The next stage for the PIA is the development of a strategic plan that will outline the committee and community's work plan for the ensuing year. Public engagement constitutes a facet of the strategic plan, as well. The PIA is now seeking broader community input, offering a comprehensive newcomer orientation package and developing a website for marketing purposes. The PIA has a database of volunteers in the area that have various language capabilities. The group has established a relationship with Winnipeg's International Centre, hoping to market Portage la Prairie as a desirable destination for immigrants in Winnipeg seeking to move to a smaller locale. The Province of Manitoba currently does not provide funds to Portage la Prairie for settlement, though the extent of planning and initiatives undertaken thus far serve to display that the City is serious in making considerable efforts to facilitate immigration.

The PIA has an understanding that personal interaction is key to competitiveness in attracting immigrants, that this process takes time and that a point person is required to operate the hub that both immigrants and community members can approach for appropriate information. City staff cited the example of one prospective immigrant family that was enthused when the office responded to the family's email after 4 or 5 other communities contacted failed to do so.

City staff emphasized that the PIA is attentive to its image and stressed they want outsiders to feel as though they are dealing with a competent agency that provides professional, consistent services. Considerable support and a strong mandate from the City provide the PIA with the stability to achieve this goal. City Council acts as a guiding intermediary force that is “filling the gap between need and demand” while the immigration plan is in a state of relative infancy.

From the City’s perspective, Portage la Prairie is attractive because it is self-contained, both big enough and small enough, with available land for development, education, health care, recreation, affordable housing and skilled and unskilled jobs. Winnipeg is in close enough proximity to access additional amenities.

Table 1: Immigration to Portage la Prairie, 1999-2004

Portage la Prairie Immigration	
Year	Number
1999	0
2000	6
2001	5
2002	5
2003	13
2004	12
Total	41

Source: Citizenship and Immigration Canada; prepared by Manitoba Labour and Immigration, April 2005

Existing Supports and Initiatives

Settlement: The Portage la Prairie International Agency (PIA) provides information on/assistance with:

- Individual and group settlement;
- Healthcare, education, banking, laws in Manitoba, shopping and employment;
- Adult ESL classes;
- Filling out forms for a Manitoba B Health Card, social insurance number, travel documents, child tax benefits and Canadian citizenship;
- Obtaining permanent resident cards;
- Contacting government offices by phone, fax or postal service;
- Housing and referrals;
- The public or private school system;
- Accessing community services such as doctors and dentists;
- Linking families with community support services such as church and social groups;
- Supportive counseling, advocacy and general referral services;
- Employment services - Canadian labour market information, employer liaison and referrals;
- Supporting family reunification through sponsorship awareness; and
- Canadian citizenship.

(Adapted from PIA's brochure)

ESL: The Central Manitoba Literacy Association offers ESL classes.

- One evening class is offered per week.
- Many immigrants have shift work and therefore find it difficult to attend ESL classes when they are offered.
- A volunteer component to ESL, which is funded by Manitoba Labour and Immigration, offers training workshops for volunteers with the intent that volunteers can provide flexible services, matching their skills to the immigrant language learner's needs in settlement, conversation or grammar.
- Currently there exists no critical mass to permit more diversified and formalized ESL classes, despite the fact that those taking classes have differing language capabilities and needs.

Immigrants' Perspective: Key Findings

Due to the extremely small number of immigrants successfully contacted, the information offered and presented here is far from representative. Nonetheless, this feedback from immigrants should be seen as valuable for the purposes of exploring the challenges and opportunities in the city. It should be restated that the intent of contacting immigrants in this study was to receive qualitative feedback and impressions on the immigration and settlement experience to inform future initiatives towards welcoming, settlement and retention.

For the Portage la Prairie case, interviews were held with three individual immigrants and one group of husband and wife. Certain information has been withheld to ensure anonymity.

Positive Aspects about the Area and What Factored in Choosing and Settling in Portage la Prairie

Employment in the area is a draw factor: all contacted came to Portage la Prairie for reasons of employment/business opportunities after initially settling elsewhere in Manitoba.

On the whole, those spoken with seem willing to settle in Portage la Prairie if personally satisfied with career/business, though two hinted at the possibility of leaving if better prospects materialize.

Interviewees with families spoke of the school system in extremely positive terms. One in particular spoke of advantages of the city's schools over urban schools, which his children had attended.

One respondent came to Portage la Prairie only after a friend had invited him. Though he had come to the province on an exploratory visit, he had not visited nor considered Portage la Prairie. An additional contact helped find a business in the community, which he feels is stable and positive for his family.

Those with families spoke of the many positives of living in the community, feeling that there were certain elements in particular (e.g., crime) and more general reasons "not to move back to an urban setting".

Positive environmental factors cited include an "extraordinary amount of space" and an amazing sky.

Housing and general cost of living is extremely low in Portage la Prairie, particularly for those coming from Europe.

A long time resident of Portage la Prairie feels comfortable in the area because a sizeable number originally from his home country remain and he can speak his first language regularly outside the home.

The proximity to Winnipeg is attractive for accessing shopping, greater cultural amenities and religious services not available in Portage la Prairie.

The comprehensiveness of health care offered in the area is attractive.

Negative / Challenging Aspects about Community / Immigration Process

Though satisfied with his job in Portage la Prairie, one contact missed being in a large city. He felt as though he still hadn't made any close friends after being in Portage la Prairie for four years. He cited cultural differences as impediments to establishing a social life, feeling that the lack of cultural diversity in the community leads to a feeling of it being "closed".

While job opportunities are plentiful in the community, they do not suit everyone's skills and interests. The wife of one interviewee is working in Winnipeg and one interviewee is considering looking for work in Winnipeg, having been unable to secure further employment after the mushroom farm ceased operations.

It is difficult to establish a business network and a business in Manitoba in general, according to one respondent.

One respondent cited "distressingly slow immigration procedures" and uncertainties with the immigration process and living realities (e.g., health card, bank accounts, damage deposit, driving lessons, real estate issues) though these weren't particular to Portage la Prairie.

Additional Recommendations / Comments from Immigrants

Visit Portage la Prairie first! One current immigrant resident stated how visiting the city completely changed his perspective. Originally thinking the city to be small, upon visiting he was impressed with the size of the city and services available.

"Understand and believe that there are cultural differences you have to go with" - one must adjust and learn from the community and how it operates and work hard to meet people, because people might not necessarily reach out.

The City should work more closely with the school division in promotion due to the great value many immigrants place on education and the advantages rural schools have over those in larger centres.

Study English before arriving; for one contact, this enabled him to make necessary preparations to move to the community and start his business.

Government training programs for immigrants in specific businesses would be helpful, as many don't have the knowledge to succeed in the businesses available in the area or in Manitoba in general.

Provide accurate information about job prospects and city life. For example, the idea of shift work is foreign to many immigrants.

Conclusion

Given its infancy, it is premature to gauge success of Portage la Prairie's immigration strategy; however, the city's experience to date may prove instructive, as strong leadership was given at the city level and research organized prior to the implementation of an attraction strategy. Consultation with other areas of the province with greater experience in the matter of immigration, as well as Manitoba Labour and Immigration, has assisted Portage la Prairie in developing specific objectives and supports for an immigration strategy they feel will suit their needs.

Challenges, Recommendations and Observations

Undertake a more diversified approach to attraction, support and retention. Portage la Prairie doesn't have the same predominant cultural fits as other areas in the province to attract a stream of immigrants from one predominant non-Anglo ethnic, cultural or linguistic group. Other rural areas in the province may experience similar challenges.

Facilitate a greater number of exploratory visits by prospective immigrants. These visits should be considered a key component of an immigration strategy as they will provide accurate impressions of the city; as well as an understanding of what supports and services are available. Immigrants' assumptions of what constitutes "rural" in Canada and what services/amenities are available may differ drastically from the reality of many rural communities.

Regularized supports, a strong mandate from the City and a consistent point person has lent to a considerable amount of organization in Portage la Prairie's immigration initiatives.

Establish relationships with immigration personnel in Winnipeg. Continuing to do so in Portage la Prairie's case may allow them to attract more immigrants who first landed in Winnipeg. This secondary migration option may be a sensible one for communities uncertain of where to attract from.

Develop a more comprehensive marketing strategy. One contact expressed concern that Portage la Prairie's marketing strategy would not accommodate diverse needs and motivations and wonders what will be done to tell the whole story of the community, not just that of the potato capital of Canada. Instead of an oversimplified message he recommended a more comprehensive picture, promoting the virtues of a small, safe community with affordable housing, a low cost of living, recreational facilities and access to a large cultural centre in Winnipeg.

Develop a more comprehensive marketing strategy. One contact expressed concern that Portage la Prairie's marketing strategy would not accommodate diverse needs and motivations and wonders what will be done to tell the whole story of the community, not just that of the potato capital of Canada. Instead of an oversimplified message he recommended a more comprehensive picture, promoting the virtues of a small, safe community with affordable housing, a low cost of living, recreational facilities and access to a large cultural centre in Winnipeg.

Ensure that the credibility of the message being given to prospective immigrants is buoyed by what happens in the community as a whole. Further concern was expressed over whether the community was making strides to be welcoming to minorities and the socially marginalized in all aspects of city life, rather than the insistence of this in an immigration marketing message alone.

Recommended Further Research on Case Study

- To determine retention factors for immigrants denied a larger similar cultural community: Is there an immigrant “best fit” for the city?
- How has the proximity to Winnipeg been leveraged to attract immigration? Could this proximity be further utilized?
- Are there further lessons to be learned for programming around immigration in this model? What are the successes/challenges of such an immigration strategy led and orchestrated by the city itself?

Appendix: Resource List and Contact Information

- Welcome letter sent to all arriving Provincial Nominees through recruitment office
- Portage la Prairie International Agency Information Brochure
- Portage la Prairie Orientation Manual
An extensive document providing general information about the community, as well as information about community organizations, services and other needs of new residents.

- Portage la Prairie International Interactive CD

An electronic version of the orientation manual.

- City website
<http://www.city.portage-la-prairie.mb.ca/>
- International website is being established

For further information on material and Portage la Prairie's Immigration Program contact:

Debbie Bachmeier
Skills Link Coordinator
Telephone: (204) 239-8327 Fax: (204) 239-1582
dbachmeier@city-plap.com

RDI ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Scott Grills, Chair
Dean of Arts
Brandon University

Peter Reimer
Acting Director
Rural Initiatives, Community Cooperatives
and Regional Development Initiatives
Manitoba Agriculture, Food and Rural Initiatives

Larry Flynn
Regional Manager
Population Health Promotion
Health Canada

Reg Helwer
Shur-Gro Farm Services

Ben Maendel
Jonathon Maendel
Baker Colony

Darell Pack
Senior Policy Advisor
Rural Secretariat

W.J. (Bill) Pugh
Partner & Certified Financial Planner
Meyers Norris Penny

Fran Racher
Associate Professor
School of Health Studies
Brandon University

Doug Ramsey
Associate Professor
Department of Rural Development
Brandon University

Frank Thomas
General Manager
Western Manitoba CIBC

Ray Simms
Regional Operations Manager, North-West
MTS Communications Inc.

Jeff Williams
VP Academic & Research
Brandon University

Dion Wiseman
Associate Professor
Department of Geography
Brandon University

Robert Annis
Director
Rural Development Institute
Brandon University

The role of the RDI Advisory Committee is to provide general advice and direction to the Institute on matters of rural concern. On a semi-annual basis the Committee meets to share information about issues of mutual interest in rural Manitoba and foster linkages with the constituencies they represent.