

WELCOMING COMMUNITY ROADMAP (WCR) PROJECT

Focus Groups Report (July 10, 2018)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The City of Grand Forks through the Grand Forks Immigrants Integration Initiative (GFII) Committee held a series of focus groups in April and May 2018 involving various groups of resident populations represented in the City of Grand Forks, including: Cameroonians, Liberians, Bhutanese, Nigerians, Greater Grand Forks Young Professionals, UND students, and Somalis. Through the focus groups, the GFII committee gathered information to help administrations and key stakeholders of the City of Grand Forks develop a strategic plan that leverages existing strengths and build an even more robust and integrated welcoming community in Grand Forks. The key findings of these focus group conversations are summarized below, divided by critical topic areas recommended by Welcoming America as needed for a more welcoming community.

Leadership and Civic Engagement

In general, participants from both the refugee/immigrant populations and US-born groups expressed interest in leadership opportunities. Although refugee/immigrant participants had no major concerns about civic engagement, the UND students, in particular, voiced serious concerns regarding the scheduling of local elections in Grand Forks in June when the students are on vacation. Students feel this may be a deliberate attempt to keep them from voting or participating in Grand Forks elections.

Equitable Access

Discussions about equitable access were divided into four main topics, including access to transportation, housing, healthcare, and social services. The key takeaways from each of these topics are:

Transportation:

- UND students think transportation “sucks” because of inconveniences associated with long wait times for city bus, long time on the bus, etc.
- Some refugee/immigrant students are happy with free city bus tickets, calling it a nice “perk”
- Uber appears to be the preferred means of transportation by both immigrant and US-born populations (mostly youth), but lack of Uber (and Taxi) designated stopping spots are a big problem
- Air fares to/from Grand Forks are very expensive and poses serious limitation, risks of driving to Fargo or Minneapolis, and hardships to residents

Housing:

- Access to housing is very challenging for both refugee/immigrant and US-born participants. Specific issues include complex application process, bad customer service, eligibility conditions, unfriendly neighborhoods, and cost of apartments and/or single family homes. More details are provided in the body of the report.

HealthCare:

Specific issues involving access to healthcare include:

- Lack of affordable health and/or life insurance opportunities
- Lack of awareness of and familiarity with application process for available healthcare benefits.
- Eligibility conditions, especially income levels, are a serious barrier because the income is above limit, but not enough to purchase private plans and take care of other life needs
- Altru hospital sends bills to collection companies without showing any flexibility to some refugee/immigrant patients, which causes more hardships
- The use of phone translators and/or interpreters at hospitals and clinics was thought to be a bad idea by most refugee/immigrant participants, who prefer neutral, in-person translators or interpreters.

Social Services:

The major issues identified that pose a challenge to social services programs include:

- Complicated application process;
- Complex forms and policies especially for TANF, Food stamps, Medicaid;
- Short time to compile complete application file; and,
- Income limit cutoffs. Most people remarked that they are not qualified for some of these programs based on over the limit income, but they are still struggling so much to meet with life basic needs.

Education

The barriers to education that were raised by participants fall into two categories, including youth and young adults/adults challenges.

Youth Barriers:

- Cost of daycare and cost of bus tickets
- Some cases of bullying at school
- Problems involving communication between kids and some parents and/or grandparents; need to teach dialects to kids for some refugee/immigrant communities

Young Adults/Adults Barriers:

- Desire to have deeper English lessons with emphasis on comprehension
- There was a preference by some refugee/immigrant groups to have English classes taught by their nationals who understand both their foreign language and English so that it is easier go back-and-forth between languages and improve comprehension skills for the learners
- Need better orientation programs for UND international student populations, especially to involve other international students already settled in Grand Forks
- Need help with clarifying drinking laws, limits, and general training of other legal practices

Connected Community

Based on discussions during the focus groups, there was a strong sentiment of the need for activities that will bring people of all races, cultures, ages, religion, etc. together. A snapshot of the issues raised include:

- Need a Feast of Nations type event at the city level
- Education to mitigate preconceived notions
- Activities for all ages; e.g.; teenagers 13 to under 21
- Improve UND campus and off-campus relations
- Communication mode for refugee/immigrant populations
- Need a multicultural community center (MCC)
- Grand Forks needs a diversity Czar
- Need affordable fun activities and improve scheduling

Economic Development

Two main issues emerged under economic development discussions, including start-up businesses and employment and workplace issues.

Start-up Business:

There was a general desire by members of refugee/immigrant populations to own businesses, but the following barriers were raised:

- Difficulty in getting legal documents
- Lack of awareness of loan information
- Lack of start-up subsidies such as affordable space to rent, training opportunities, etc

Employment and workplace Barriers:

Significant barriers exist regarding employment and workplace conditions, especially for refugee/immigrant populations.

Employment Issues:

- Bias in the hiring process
- Systemic discrimination
- Unwillingness of employers to sponsor work visas for international students

Workplace Issues:

- Lack of respect and trust for refugee/immigrant employees
- Lack of appreciation for hard work
- Biases in addressing work-related issues
- Supervisors not addressing concerns of people of color and the employees get sent home rather than to HR to solve problem
- Some participants strongly want unions to fight and protect their rights
- Some employers show no flexibility with work schedules for student employees, even with prior notification
- Most US-born participants love their jobs, but feel they are not paid enough for the standard of living on Grand Forks

Safe Community

In general, participants from all focus groups felt Grand Forks is a relatively safe community and any exaggerated safety concerns are “a matter of perception, generally fueled by social media that spreads falsehoods and inaccurate information”. In fact, a majority of participants from both refugees/immigrants and the Young Professionals and student groups felt safety ought to be exploited by the City as something that should help attract and retain people in Grand Forks. A few other issues that were raised include:

- Police call-ins for noise apartments where refugee/immigrants live
- Break-ins not fully investigated at one participant’s apartment
- Male/female bias is safety perception. While some male UND students felt relatively safe in the community, in general, some female students expressed unsafe concerns both in some campus and off-campus places

Public Library and Downtown

The following concerns were raised about the Grand Forks public library and downtown:

- Participants would like to see a diverse content at the library that includes material from around the world or at least to be representative of the different cultural groups in the city
- Library program schedules are often in conflict with schedules of working parents; would like to see some programs scheduled after work hours
- The library needs major upgrades to building, sitting areas, technology, Wi-Fi, etc.
- The participants were divided into two camps about where the public library ought to be located – downtown or at its current location.
- Could there be a light rail from downtown to UND?
- Downtown needs more natural environment and beauty, i.e.; planting more flowers and trees
- There is a desire to see new types of businesses other than traditional chain businesses
- More lighting in the downtown areas

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In 2017, the City of Grand Forks was awarded a technical assistance grant from Welcoming America and Partnership for a New American Economy (NAE) through NAE's Gateways for Growth Program. The aim of this grant is to help develop a strategic plan to leverage existing strengths and build an even more robust and integrated welcoming community in Grand Forks. The Gateways for Growth program began in 2015, and Grand Forks is one of 25 cities that was selected in its second round of grants for the 2017/2018 cycle.

The Welcoming Community Roadmap (WCR) project is part of a continued effort by the City of Grand Forks to find ways to welcome all new residents and ensure successful integration of immigrants and refugees as part of the community. Implementation of the WCR project involved several stages, including:

Stage 1. A demographic study conducted by New American Economy;

Stage 2. A city-wide survey of Grand Forks residents; and,

Stage 3. Focus group discussions

Stage 4. Community working groups to analyze the data and develop recommendations

Stage 5. Development of a final report to include the City's strategic roadmap

Project stage 1 was conducted by NAE and the findings have been assembled as a separate report [New American Economy, 2018]. Although stages 2 and 3 were originally intended to be carried out in a consecutive manner, these were actually conducted simultaneously in order to meet with the project timelines. Stages 4 and 5 are ongoing and will be reported on later. This sub-report is based on focus group discussions exclusively and will be used in conjunction with other reports from other stages of the project to compile a final report for the project.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The main goal of the WCR project is to help develop a strategic plan to leverage existing strengths and build an even more robust and integrated welcoming community in Grand Forks. To achieve this goal, the project was divided into several stages mentioned above, including focus group discussions with community members. The key objectives of the focus groups were to:

- Gather information about people's experiences at the personal level
- Listen to concerns about various issues in the community
- Seek ways or suggestions on how to address the concerns in a mutually inclusive manner

METHODOLOGY

The approach adopted in the implementation of the focus groups involved recruiting people from representative sub-populations in the City of Grand Forks, which included immigrants/refugees and US-born residents. Each focus group was designed to have a minimum of 6 participants and a maximum of about 10 participants, which is consistent with generally recommended focus group size for noncommercial purposes (Sage Publications, 2018). In some cases, however, the difficulty to recruit participants caused two of the 7 focus groups to include 3

and 4 participants only. The complete details about each focus group composition is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Focus Groups Details and Composition

Focus Group	# of Participants	Composition
Cameroonians	12	Mix of male and female
Liberians	17	Mix of male and female
GF Young Professionals	7	Mix of male and female
UND Students	8	Mix of male and female
Nigerians	4	All male
Bhutanese	3	All male
Somalis	5	Mix of male and female

Each focus group was run using a combination of structured and unstructured formats (Emerald Publishing, 2018), where 3 facilitators were available to moderate a conversation centered on a key question: **Do you feel welcome in Grand Forks? If so, why? If not, why?** The moderators asked follow-up questions that were intended to initiate conversation on key areas recommended by Gateways for growth such as education, leadership, equitable access, economic development, connected community, safe community, and civic engagement. Detailed notes taken independently by all 3 facilitators were combined and used to compile the findings presented in this report.

RESULTS

The information gathered during the focus group discussions was broken down into 7 key focus areas recommended by Welcoming America (2018), including leadership, civic engagement, equitable access, education, connected communities, economic development, and safe communities. In addition, other general concerns and public library specific comments were gathered. The findings are summarized under these headings below.

Leadership

Some participants of the focus groups expressed interest in leadership and would like to see more opportunities for refugees and immigrant community members to get involved in leadership roles.

Civic Engagement

There were no major concerns raised by refugees and immigrant participants regarding civic engagement. Most participants from these subpopulations had more to say about other issues (discussed below) than any worries about civic engagement. However, UND student participants expressed deep concerns about the timing of local elections in Grand Forks, which are held during the summer months when students are on vacation and cannot participate. Students held a view that this is somewhat intentional to limit them from voting in local Grand Forks elections.

Equitable Access

Equitable access discussions revolved around transportation, housing, health care, and social services such as food stamps, TANF, and Medicaid. There was a general feeling of an assumption in Grand Forks that everybody owns a car, but the reality is different especially considering students that live at UND dormitories. Also, the general expectation that with low demand for housing (currently being experience in Grand Forks) comes lower cost to rent or to buy a house does not seem to agree with the reality – rents and home purchase prices are extremely high! A snapshot of the key issues discussed is provided below.

Access to Transportation

City Bus:

- UND students, especially those that live on campus student residential complexes, describe access to transportation in Grand Forks as “it sucks”. Students’ biggest problems have to do with long wait times, long time spent on bus, especially weekends when these problems are compounded. Consequently, these students feel left out of fun events that they would otherwise want to attend downtown or around the city.
- Another focus group of refugees/immigrants shared positive experiences with the city bus. One participant mentioned that it was a nice “perk” that the city bus is free for students.

Uber:

- Uber appears to be the preferred means of transportation by both UND students, YP participants, and some members of refugees/immigrant groups. However, there were issues regarding waiting areas to pick-up Uber rides because the police often would not allow parking in front of business locations for client pick-up. Similar concerns about lack of designated Taxi wait areas or stands were raised. The police have been assigning fines of up to \$150, which creates more stressful situations.

Expensive Air Fares:

- Transportation by air was also identified as a big problem by immigrant communities who have to either fly to visit family out-of-state or have family come visit them in Grand Forks. It was unanimously echoed that fares to/from Grand Forks airport are too expensive, partly due to lack of competition since only two airlines serve the airport. This situation is made worse for immigrant students who may have to travel to Fargo or Minneapolis, but do not have access to transportation. Even those who have cars indicated significant inconveniency and significant risk of driving long distances.

Suggestions:

- UND students suggested a bike share program to be implemented in Grand Forks to provide a low-cost transportation option to students who don’t own a car. Along with this suggestion was the need to expand bike lanes, especially to downtown and other major streets and avenues to ensure safe rides.
- To combat high flying costs, the city should consider attracting more airlines even if it means subsidizing initially to make it feasible so that with increase in travel volumes, the city can dial-back and terminate the subsidies. The participants also noted that increased air traffic in Grand Forks would also amount to greater revenue, in what they described as

“a win-win situation”. To facilitate this suggestion, the city could negotiate for additional airlines to begin with a small schedule such as flying twice a week and then increase the frequency as traffic increases.

Access to Housing

High Costs:

- Apartment rents are deemed to be too expensive; cost is about \$200 more for a 2 bedroom apartment compared to nearby cities like Fargo. It was commented that this seems counterproductive given that Grand Forks has a large student population.
- The only way to afford an apartment is to get a roommate, but often landlords are not happy with many people living in a single apartment because owners fear high traffic in apartments could lead to damage to property.
- Security deposits are also too high, thus, limiting access to students and other low income applicants, especially those who are new and may not have a job yet.
- One participant described rents cost as “insane unless you have a roommate”. Another participant remarked that she decided to buy a house instead of renting and the cost of her monthly mortgage was about \$100 less than the rents for a single 2 bedroom apartment unit.
- Single family home prices were also identified as being very high in Grand Forks compared to other cities and, worse still, the houses have smaller capacity than similarly priced homes in other places.

Eligibility Conditions:

- Credit history/worthiness, job requirements, rental history were among the serious road blocks to renting an apartment
- Application process often was lengthy, complicated paperwork, lack of proper communication/feedback from owners presented serious stress to new tenants, especially students. Students remarked that it can easily take up to a month or more to get into an apartment, even when the applicant is qualified and fully eligible to rent.

Financial Assistant Programs:

- Many participants indicated that they don’t qualify for available financial assistance programs due to income levels, but the income is not enough to pay the high rents and still take care of other life necessities like childcare, car loan, food, etc.
- Application process is lengthy and paperwork is too complicated
- Limited number of people per apartment very problematic, especially for UND students with families.

Unfriendly Environment:

- Some students indicated that living in apartment complexes with older people was challenging. The atmosphere was unfriendly, with little to no interaction. One person said, “I know my neighbor has a dog, but I don’t know my neighbor”. People expected an opportunity to get to know each other and even short conversations are better than none.

- Noise complaints are a major issue, especially in areas with refugees and immigrant populations. Often the police are called in even for birthday events, meanwhile these residents expected some level of mutual understanding in such situations.
- Residents of some neighborhoods complaint about too many cars being parked around even if it is somebody's house. Some members of the immigrant/refugee community have come to view this as unfriendly and unwelcoming.

Access to HealthCare

Participants expressed difficulties associated with getting health and/or life insurance. The concerns raised about health care are summarized as follows:

- Most people are not familiar with application process for any available health benefits.
- For benefits that are tied to income levels, people are screened out because the income is above limit, but the income is not enough to purchase private plans and take care of other life needs.
- Altru hospital has not been flexible with refugee/immigrant patients who owe bills and often the bills are sent to collection companies, which creates bad credit history for individuals and make life even much harder.
- Many individuals mentioned that they are not eligible to apply for the financial aid program at Altru
- There is need for affordable health insurance for families and for temporary visitors
- The use of phone translators and/or interpreters at hospitals and clinics was thought to be a bad idea by most refugee/immigrant participants. They prefer neutral, in-person translators or interpreters.

Access to Social Services

The major issues identified that pose a challenge to social services programs include complicated application process; complex forms and policies especially for TANF, Food stamps, Medicaid; short time to compile complete application file; and, income limit cutoffs. Most people remarked that they are not qualified for some of these programs based on over the limit income, but they are still struggling so much to meet with life basic needs.

Education

The barriers to education that were raised by participants fall into two categories, including youth and young adults/adults challenges.

Youth Challenges

- One of the biggest difficulties to youth education was identified to be cost of school bus and cost of daycare for infants. One participant who recently moved to Grand Forks from another state remarked that it cost her \$40 a week to get her children to school here, but it was free in the state she came from.
- Daycare cost are too high! One parent, a single mom, explain her situation where she pays \$275 a week for daycare and makes \$800 a week. Thus, childcare alone takes up about 40% of her salary and she is left with \$525. An apartment rent of \$800 – \$1000 a month amounts to \$200 – \$250 a week, which leaves her with only \$275 - \$325 a week to fight for groceries, car payments, health care premiums, utility bills and other living expenses.

- A case of bullying was also raised involving an elementary school kid. A female classmate told the boy “he was too brown, like chocolate”. At first nothing was done to address the situation, until the parent went and talked to the principal to get it addressed.
- There appears to be a growing concern among some immigrant/refugee populations, where a sizable number of parents/grandparents who don’t speak English are losing the ability to communicate with their children/grandchildren because the children are losing the ability to speak their dialects. Hence, these populations would like financial support to organize classes to teach the children some native language skills to maintain communication with elderly family members.

Young Adults/Adults Challenges

- There is a desire to have deeper English language classes, with emphasis on comprehension. People indicated that it is a different thing to pass an English exam than being able to read and understand an application form for a job, a service, etc.
- Some immigrants who are not refugees also need English language classes.
- There was some preference by some immigrant/refugee populations to have English classes taught by their nationals who understand both their foreign language and English so that it is easier go back-and-forth between languages and improve comprehension skills for the learners.
- Improved orientation programs for UND international student populations are desired, where peer connections are made to facilitate settling into Grand Forks.
- Need help with clarifying drinking laws, limits, and general training of other legal practices

Suggestion:

Participants of one focus group thought it might be better to have current international students be the volunteer to pick new arrivals at the airport so some mentoring can begin and contacts can be exchanged for there to be someone to call or go to for subsequent help. Currently, the volunteers play a simple pick-up and drop-off role and the new comer will be left to fend for himself/herself, which can be difficult.

Connected Community

The conversation about connected community was very dynamic and centered on a few different subjects, including inter-cultural group relations; age group interactions; preconceived notions; ND nice attitudes; and, general feelings about people and places. A summary of the comments made is presented below.

The Chicken and Ducks Analogy

The “chicken and ducks analogy” as relayed by one participant is a succinct description of the high degree of compartmentalization experienced in the community, where there are virtually no inter-cultural group interactions. This person likened the situation in Grand Forks to eggs from chicken and ducks that can be hatched together in the same basket, but the chicks grow and part ways into separate chicken and ducks groups. He reiterated the need for more cross-cultural mixing at different functions such as city events, private events, social events, etc. There was a general consensus of refugee/immigrant groups and US-born groups that a city-led effort is needed to implement diversity programs like “a Feast of Nations at the city level”.

The Young professionals group noted a lack of “togetherness” among various nonprofit groups in Grand Forks and would like to see an effort to improve such relations; perhaps access to a city-run rolodex might help to improve collaboration.

Age Group Interactions

Students that live off-campus felt that the apartment complex is not friendly, especially when many other tenants are older people. They remarked that there is little to no interaction. One student said, “I know my neighbor has a dog, but I don’t know my neighbor. Because I live in an apartment with older people as neighbors I can expect, at best, short conversations. However, short conversations are better than no conversations at all”.

Preconceived Notions

Concerns were raised regarding preconceived notions people have for new comers from certain countries or regions around the world or of a certain race. This has led to a general sense of fear of any refugee/immigrant that moves into any neighborhood. Some participants noted that “very few people will take the initiative to welcome refugee families into the neighborhood”.

Retention of Residents

People felt that the city needs to engage in retention strategies. For example, Grand Forks is Cooler Campaign is good and can recruit people, but how are these people connected and integrated so they can be active and stay?

UND Campus and Off-campus Relations

Students who live off-campus find it harder to connect with those that live on-campus and on-campus students feel the rest of Grand Forks doesn’t consider them as part of the larger community.

North Dakota Nice

People have a concern about what they called “North Dakota nice”, which is a situation where someone would smile at you but will speak negatively of you behind your back.

Communication Mode

Most members of refugee/immigrant groups indicated a lack of awareness about events, news, business gatherings, or volunteer opportunities because information does not reach them. The preferred mode of communication appears to be through their leadership structures, group social media outlets, and by word of mouth. Information dissemination via newspapers, local TV, and radio hardly reaches these communities. The YP group participants commented on communication saying, “if you want to communicate to young people by email, forget it, it isn’t going to work”.

Training Programs

Members of refugee/immigrant communities desire training programs on city ordinances, laws, economic opportunities, business opportunities, legal practices, and other general matters.

Multicultural Community Center (MCC)

Participants from both refugee/immigrant communities and US-born residents expressed a strong feeling for a city gathering space to host diverse types of events – potentially called Multicultural Community Center (MCC). Participants from refugee/immigrant groups, in particular, feel an urgent need for such a space because there is no regular event hall that will accept ethnic food at their facility for an event. These populations maintain that ethnic food is an intricate part of their culture. The YP group has credited much of their meetings and activities to the use of 701 hall and would very much like to see something better that is accessible to more city residents. **There was a general sentiment that the city needs a diversity czar.**

Affordable Fun Activities

Participants mentioned that there is general lack of fun activities and the few that are available are too expensive. Private activity centers such as Northern Air and others are expensive so there is a need for affordable city operated activity centers. The indoor park is a good start, but it only opens from noon to 3 pm.

Fun activities for teenagers are desired because most of the current activities are geared towards those who are 21 years or older. Many activities for younger than teenage kids can be designed to include both adult and kids entertainment themes, since parents almost have to accompany kids to these activities.

A group of UND students unanimously agreed that there are virtually no activities for teenagers less than 21 years of age. The general feeling was that the downtown area has too many bars and nothing for under 21. Most students felt Fargo was livelier, saying “Fargo has a pottery shop where you can go in, paint a bowl, and have fun; Grand Forks does not have that type of thing”.

Positive Remarks Expressed by Participants Include:

- Grand Forks is a nice place to live and raise a family
- Grand Forks is relatively safe and one can walk long distances without fear
- The farmer’s market is a good idea, as is the greenway
- UND’s community involvement Expo has been a good idea. One participant actually learned about volunteerism at one of such campus involvement fair.
- New flavors food truck is a good idea; needs to be marketed better.
- A participant from one focus group remarked, “We have a lot of people coming from Grafton and Canada so there must be something special about this city that draws people. We just need to focus on creating more of those somethings”.

Some Suggestions Proposed by Participants are:

- Could the park district help organize some activities to avoid the problem of using volunteers that may sometimes not be very dependable?
- Could some activities be hosted at the VFW or American Legion, especially since there is no city event center?
- Alley Alive was fun; could there be more of those?
- Community picnics would be fun
- Winter events such as Winnipeg’s winter festival
- Holly Dazzle is good, but UND students are on vacation
- No intermingling and integration; have something like a soccer league involving a mix of people
- Have something that brings people of mix races together such as games, food, etc.

Economic Development

Two main topics were explored under economic development, including entrepreneurship or start-up business spirit and employment issues.

Start-up Businesses

There was a general desire by members of refugee/immigrant populations to own businesses, but the following barriers were raised.

- Difficulty in getting legal documents
- Lack of awareness of loan information
- Lack of start-up subsidies such as affordable space to rent, training opportunity fees, taxes, etc.

Employment

Although most members of all focus groups agree Grand Forks has a relatively low unemployment rate, the jobs are rather low-level jobs; i.e., hardly any jobs that can be filled by those with post-graduate education. For the low-level jobs that appear to be readily available, especially in the healthcare industry, there are issues with the hiring process and workplace conditions. These challenges and other general employment issues are summarized below.

Bias in Hiring Process

There are certain biases that some people are experiencing in the hiring process:

- Numbers of people employed and used to claim diverse workforce are severely skewed; mainly using 1 or 2 people hired as props to fulfill diversity needs. One person puts it as, “we are the person in the middle of the photo”.
- Some people feel they have to be over-qualified to be considered for employment

Systemic Discrimination

There have been experiences of what appears to be systemic discrimination both in the hiring process and in the workplace.

- One person recounted an experience where he applied for a job and had more than the required qualifications, but was turned down on the grounds that a more qualified candidate was found. A week later the very same position was re-posted.
- Another person told a story of applying for the same job twice. She applied online; sent in her resume and application forms; she was called for interview and turned down on grounds that a more qualified candidate was found. A month later the same job re-posted and she applied again; got called for interview again. While at the second interview, the Interviewer said, oh, they didn't know it was still her. Consequently, she believed she was well qualified based on her credentials, but the employer just didn't want to give her the job.
- Others believe that by noticing certain names, their applications are automatically denied even the chance for an interview

Work Visas

International students who graduate from UND or surrounding colleges often would love to stay and work in Grand Forks, but local employers are unwilling to sponsor or facilitate work visas. Consequently, people move out of Grand Forks after graduation and the skilled workers trained in Grand Forks are forced to leave the local area, which is a loss of talent. However, UND does sponsor certain work visas for post-graduates such as H1B.

Workplace Conditions

Several issues appear to be happening in the workplace as raised by participants, especially people from refugees/immigrants populations. Many of these individuals spoke very passionately about their struggles and challenges. A summary of the documented issues includes:

- There is a general consensus that people of color have to work twice as hard as their white counterparts and even under those circumstances will rarely be appreciated
- Lack of trust
- People of color are continually told, “I can’t understand what you are saying, you have an accent”.
- Biases in settling workplace issues. People of color are never afforded the benefit of doubt or innocent until proven guilty. Penalties for any minor error are always harsher for people of color compared to similar situations involving white counterparts, who are often left free of any punishment.
- Supervisors do not address concerns of people of color; instead the employee gets sent home rather than to HR for problem resolution.
- Some participants strongly want unions to fight and protect their rights in the workplace, but are so afraid to voice this opinion because they almost certainly will get fired immediately.
- Problems filing for unemployment benefit because the employers lie that employee was not fired and would say he/she left voluntarily.
- Lack of flexibility for work-study employees. One participant recounted a situation where he had arranged for a night shift so he could attend classes in the day. His employer decided to cut the night shift and then try to blame him for not being able to work during the day. Subsequently, he was asked by the employer to sign voluntary termination papers so he would not be able to apply for any unemployment benefit afterwards.
- Grand Forks Young Professionals love their jobs, but feel they are not paid what they are worth to support what feels like a higher than expected standard of living in the city.

Some Suggestions that were made are:

- Encourage employers to implement “train to hire” opportunities, not just job fairs.
- Job interview and resume training opportunities
- The city should set an example by hiring people of color

Safe Community

In general, participants from all focus groups felt Grand Forks is a relatively safe community and any exaggerated safety concerns are “a matter of perception, generally fueled by social media that spreads falsehoods and inaccurate information”. In fact, a majority of participants from both refugees/immigrants and the Young Professionals and students groups felt

safety ought to be exploited by the City as something that should help attract and retain people in Grand Forks. However, a few issues related to safety that were raised include:

Police Calls for Noise Reasons: most participants from refugees/immigrants communities reported experiences of neighbors calling the police on them because of noise at apartments, especially during celebrations of birthdays for kids and adults or other small events that do not necessarily need renting of a big hall. These participants felt they needed to be given a benefit-of-doubt and not call police on them when they are simply trying to celebrate with friends and/or family, especially given most come from areas where police are rather greatly feared.

Break-ins not Fully Investigated: One participant shared an experience involving a break-in to the apartment and police were called, but after responding to the scene never pursued the investigation further and simply said “nothing could be done”.

Male-Female Bias in Safety Perception: There was somewhat of a divide among members of the student focus group, where the males felt very safe while the female students felt unsafe in certain areas of UND campus and certain residential areas in the city. Some cited places include area behind Caribu coffee on 24th Ave S, the apartments over by the cemetery, and the area near Alpha Chi on UND campus.

Public Library

The public library was discussed as a separate entity that serves the larger community and can play a role in maintaining a welcoming atmosphere in the city. The following are concerns and suggestions raised:

- Participants would like to see a diverse content at the library that includes material from around the world or at least to be representative of the different cultural groups in the city
- Library program schedules are often in conflict with schedules of working parents; would like to see some programs scheduled after work hours
- The library needs major upgrades to building, sitting areas, technology, Wi-Fi, etc. Participants would like to see more sitting space, conference rooms, moveable chairs and tables to quick create more confined modular spaces for private groups similar to what is at UND memorial union basement.
- The participants were divided into two camps about where the public library ought to be located – downtown or at its current location.

Other General Comments

Because the format of the focus group discussions allowed for free expression of opinions by participants, other remarks that do not fall within any of the Gateways for Growth recommended key areas were discussed. The issues raised are summarized below.

- Roads are not maintained around apartment complexes
- Would like to have an immigration services center in Grand Forks to alleviate the hardship of having to go to Fargo or Minneapolis when transportation is a challenge
- “Drug usage is an epidemic. At UND as a freshman, I felt all I could do here was party and go to bars/fraternities. UND students are not well versed with what they can do in the community”
- Could there be a light rail from downtown to UND?

- Downtown needs more natural environment and beauty, i.e.; planting more flowers and trees
- There is a desire to see new types of businesses other than traditional chain businesses
- More lighting in the downtown area has been helpful
- UND needs to consider putting lights on the flower pots

CONCLUSIONS

A series of focus group discussions was conducted by the GFIII committee in April and May 2018 to listen and gather information to help the administration and key stakeholders of the City of Grand Forks develop a strategic plan that leverages existing strengths and build an even more robust and integrated welcoming community in Grand Forks. The various groups that were involved include Cameroonians, Liberians, Bhutanese, Nigerians, Greater Grand Forks Young Professionals, UND students, and Somalis.

The key findings of these focus group conversations show that efforts need to be put by the city and/or appropriate stakeholders to address some welcoming community barriers, including:

- Community interaction and relationships between cultural groups, age groups, UND campus and larger community
- Employment hiring biases and systemic discrimination
- Workplace conditions
- Access to transportation, housing, social services, and healthcare
- Overall city upkeep, upgrade, and modernization to attract and retain new comers

RECOMMENDATIONS (to be completed after working group sessions)

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