



Pelican Rapids, Minnesota

Pelican Rapids is a diverse rural community where 18 different languages are spoken in the elementary school. By developing cross-cultural learning opportunities and a youth soccer league, this community capitalizes on the entrepreneurial talents of local immigrants.

	Pelican Rapids
Population (2000)	2,374
Municipal budget (2005)	\$580,000 ⁹²
Per capita income (2000)	\$13,700
Median household income (2000)	\$27,200
Poverty rate (2000)	16%
Minority population (2000)	22%
Proximity to urban center	50 miles to Fargo, N.D.
Proximity to interstate highway	12 miles
Strategic approach	Entrepreneurship Organizational development
Time frame	1990–2006

Located in west-central Minnesota, Pelican Rapids is considered one of the most culturally diverse communities in the state.⁹³ Hispanic, Vietnamese, Bosnian and Somali refugees have migrated to this historically white, rural community in search of work at the county's largest employer, West Central Turkeys. The injection of new culture and language into this tiny town has brought a variety of challenges and opportunities to civic leaders in Pelican. "We try to do everything we can to make a safe and stable place for people to live," Pelican Rapids Mayor Wayne Runningen said. "We work across city groups to facilitate the transition of people to our community." Rather than holding immigrants at a distance, Pelican Rapids has designed an innovative, locally controlled system to integrate them into civic, social and economic life, and is using the growth to fuel the economy.

The community and its history

Pelican Rapids is in the lakes region of Otter Tail County in rural west-central Minnesota. A traditionally agricultural region, economic activity has expanded to the processing of farm products, especially turkeys. In addition, tourism has been growing with the recent opening of Maplewood State Park nearby and the giant pelican statue in town.

Pelican Rapids was settled by Norwegians in 1868, and the community was long dominated by northern European culture. This began to

⁹² Personal communication with city clerk treasurer, November 9, 2006.

⁹³ Immigrants in Pelican Rapids are from the following countries: Ukraine, Mexico, Belarus, Bosnia, Croatia, Serbia, Russia, Iraq, Kurdish Iraq, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos .

change about 30 years ago when Mexican migrant workers started coming to the area for agricultural work. Through the 1980s and 1990s, Southeast Asian immigrants found their way into Pelican, attracted by work at the turkey processing plant, the county's largest employer at just over 700 employees. As is true for many meat processing operations across rural America, immigrant workers are a major factor in the plant's success. In 1995 a Bosnian human resource director at West Central Turkeys embarked on a company initiative to sponsor refugee workers from Eastern Europe. A year later 100 Bosnian refugees arrived in Pelican. "Our school system, with 1,400 students, had at least 12 languages and dialects being spoken," recalled Jim Christianson, owner of a small local business. "There was a tremendous need for translation services and for teaching people how to live in this country. We were facing a social emergency."

The strategy

Pelican's strategy for building local capacity and nurturing entrepreneurship has been to create and coordinate a web of services for both immigrant and native residents. Leaders in Pelican Rapids recognized the importance of immigrant labor to the local poultry processing industry. Research suggests that, in addition to providing labor for West Central Turkeys, immigrants tend to have strong entrepreneurial tendencies. These factors combined to make immigrant integration in Pelican Rapids a crucial economic development issue. The strategy has been a coordinated effort by several organizations, including Lutheran Social Services, the Pelican Rapids Library and the local schools. It began at a meeting in the late 1980s when a group of volunteers at the library started to think strategically about how the library might facilitate understanding between new and long-term residents. The result of this meeting was the formation of a multicultural committee that would work to help people understand each other.

The committee partnered with the school system to initiate a new program designed to educate students about different cultures. This included a series of visits from immigrants living in Pelican Rapids, who shared stories about their native countries. The committee also established a buddy system that paired new immigrants with American students who helped them through the school system. The library began offering four English-as-a-second-language classes each week, a bilingual story time, a literacy drive and miscellaneous presentations about immigration. At the same time, the school system and library worked hard to enhance programming and learning resources for the traditional residents of Scandinavian background so as to be as inclusive as possible.

In response to the public unease about the changing complexion of Pelican Rapids, the multicultural committee hosted a series of public conversations in which residents could voice

their concerns. Using the information gleaned from these discussions, the library began running a series of articles in the local paper, highlighting each culture and interviewing a specific Pelican Rapids resident from the ethnic group being profiled. The articles served as an opportunity to put a face with a culture and improve understanding across cultures. The committee also emphasized similarities that new immigrants had with existing residents and pointed out that all of the immigrants were coming to work and earn a living. The committee noticed that people's thinking began to shift as residents learned more about the newcomers, their challenges and their cultures. "People, including the students, now say that 'We're great precisely because we're so diverse,'" a library administrator said.

The culmination of this shift occurred in 2000 when a teacher noticed the passion and excitement that some of her students had for soccer. She scheduled a meeting for students with an interest in soccer and 200 showed up. That summer, Pelican Rapids formed its first under-age-16 soccer team, made up of Bosnian, Somali, Hispanic and European American students. After winning all of its regular season games, the team was invited to play in the state championship. The team left town with a celebratory police escort and went on to place second in the state of Minnesota. "Everyone here respects sports," said Joan Ellison, a member of Friends of the Library. "This community began to see that these immigrants should be given respect. The soccer team gave us something to be proud of." Pelican's soccer team continues to be a source of community pride as it has traveled to the state tournament four times in the past six years.

What are the lessons from this story?

Look for entrepreneurs within immigrant communities. Small business entrepreneurship is a substantial contributor to economic development in small towns. As a result of their integration strategy, Pelican Rapids appears to be on the front-end of an economic reawakening based on the entrepreneurial tendencies of new immigrant residents. The town is starting to see new immigrant-owned retail shops and grocery stores downtown. These immigrant-owned businesses pay local taxes, hire local workers and contribute toward building a viable civic infrastructure in Pelican Rapids.

Social events, such as soccer, can be a great source of community identity and integration. Travelers to foreign countries have long recognized that sports (especially soccer) can be a universal language to promote understanding and cooperation among different individuals and cultures. In the case of Pelican Rapids, soccer brought kids and families together from different cultural groups and ultimately became a source of community pride.

It is important to build a web of service organizations to facilitate integration. In terms of small town development, the most immediate challenge associated with the arrival of immigrants is that civic and social infrastructure can be quickly overwhelmed. Leaders in Pelican Rapids

recognized that a number of social service groups could work collaboratively to help aid immigrant transition. These groups included the library, schools and Lutheran Social Services, as well as volunteers in the community. Rather than leaving these groups to work independently of each other, Pelican Rapids formed the multicultural committee, which coordinated a web of social services and provided a lead agency for the community's integration efforts.

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