City opening the door to newcomers

Q: How did the plan come together?
Tom Wahls
We started working on it in late February and ended in May. We gave ourselves 30 days to write the plan, and when we had these conversations, nobody stood at the head of the table — everybody had the chance to talk as much as they wanted to. You had the same voice as everybody else. This was truly by city government, the business community and other parts of the community, and so what you have in there... has that flavor to it.

Q: The plan seems to build upon other recent efforts to make Dayton a better place — Dayton CREATE, the Greater Downtown Dayton Plan by the Downtown Dayton Partnership, the various city of peace efforts, such as the Friendship Peace Park and the Dayton Literary Peace Prize, was that intentional?
Tim Riordan
Yes, all those groups were also at the table; we consciously involved them in the process.

Mila Ervin
When we were working on the Greater Downtown Dayton Plan, we found in our research that one of our common keys to success in a city is diversity; young professionals and people coming up really celebrated diversity and want to live in diverse places that are cool and not cookie-cutter. The Wel- come Dayton! plan helps with a lot of things we’re already doing. It would be great if Dayton becomes known as a progressive, good city with good people who want to do the right thing; that would also attract a lot of people who aren’t immigrants, but who just want live in this kind of place.

Tim Riordan
I like that word that Mike used: “Progressive.”

Mila Ervin
Dayton has always had a positive history — far back as the 1970s. When I moved here then from South Africa, I remember the city was welcoming the lot I was running apartheid, and passed a resolution supporting the refugees. It’s about peace accords — talking peace at the base? I wonder what happened. Remember (former Dayton congressman) Tony Holt? He did a lot of his hunger work here, and helped bring refugees to the city. Dayton is progressive — this is nothing new. Dayton is always reaching out to other parts of the world.

Cheryl Scroggins: When we were having our talks, I realized there are so many people in the community who need to know more about what is going on in the other side of the city. I had the privilege of staying to get my first awareness of the Latino citizens, with a friend from Brazil, and I was amazed at the number of people from these different countries, places, languages. People need to understand and learn about what is going on in different cultures. This is an opportunity time to pull resources from our community and reach out to people who need help. It’s a wonderful plan.

Colleen Szostak: There are people here who are dependent on others for their livelihoods, and this creates a plan for them to become contributors, and a way for people to give gifts they have already to go from being invisible to being active, contributing part of the community.

Mila Ervin
This is one of the most important parts of the plan — we want to see that everyone is counted, and see where we’re at. Dayton is a diverse city.

Cheryl Scroggins: This means that all of us are here to help others. We need to understand and learn about other cultures. This is an opportunity time to pull resources from our community and reach out to people who need help. It’s a wonderful plan.

Colleen Szostak: There are people here who are dependent on others for their livelihoods, and this creates a plan for them to become contributors, and a way for people to give gifts they have already to go from being invisible to being active, contributing part of the community.

Tim Riordan
The beauty of the plan is that it allows us capitalise on what we already have here now. We have immigrants who have lived here forever, who have invested here for a long time, they will be able to benefit from this. Maybe Native Americans can, too. While it’s written with a focus on immigration, it’s for everybody else, as well.

Wahls
That is the message we need to get out there — that people have value and worth, and that we will do all we can to get out there and help them.

Q: So, if the plan works, what does Dayton look like five or 10 years from now?
Alfaro: What I see is a lot of institutions and organizations being able to deal even better with immigrants, so we are growing in population; I see us demonstrating that we are friendly, defined as an immigrant-friendly community. I think we will also experience more entrepreneurs on a retail and larger-scale level, and attract more international investment. We will attract people from the refugee level to the international-investor level, a broad spectrum.

Riordan
We all know it’s a global economy, and getting more people to see each day, and we can mirror that in this community... and all understand each other better in terms of language, culture, religion. Some may stay away from that, but we should start with that. We need to build bridges and not walls. We need people here who travel all over the globe to do business; we also have people doing the same kind of business with them here, and to connect. It will take work; this is a while in work that doesn’t end in five years. Change is happening, we got to be willing to address and embrace that.

Schatz
This can return us to being a community. I want to see children playing streets in the park, and helping the elderly with their groceries. I want people to buy old houses and make them nice again. I want to bring that sense of community back to my neighborhood.

Gleason
I love to hear comments like that. If people here believe that, and tell people around the country and world, we really should have to spend zero dollars marketing this.

Ervin
You know, a while ago I went to Oklahoma City to talk to the developers of their downtown riverfront, and when I got there they said, “Wow, we’re hearing all these great things about Dayton!” They had just heard the NPR piece about the immigrant-friendly city, and news USA Today. That’s pretty neat — I went down there to see and learn about their stuff, and they’re talking about how great Dayton is.

Q: That brings the question: Why do you think the plan has gotten the amount of national attention it has?
Riordan
It counts a lot of things happening around the country, like Alabama and Arizona. This has become an international news story. Tim Riordan got a letter from somebody in China wanting to move here. I have a university friend who’s Latino whose mother was an immigrant and she moved here; she has eight kids, and could’ve lived anywhere. We’ve become an island of a sense of calmness.

Schatz
It’s catching on because it’s so different. A lot of cities have lost jobs and population and they’re all trying to attract big companies. We are saying we just want to attract people who want to live here and make it a nice city. That’s a head-scratcher, and some people are seeing it as an alternative, asking, ‘what’s that?’

Gleason
I hope it has a rippling effect, that other cities and states say, ‘Why don’t we try that?’. Lots of states are very anti-immigrant, and I hope this would counter that and they would join us. The U.S. as a whole needs that. Friends in South Africa said, “You mean’t, to be an immigrant-friendly town?” And I was just talking about Dayton. I hope this changes the perception of how people perceive America; that would help us in the fight against terrorism. I see it growing into something bigger than us.

Tim Riordan
Dayton city manager.

Roundtable participants
Cheryl Scroggins, Public Health — Dayton and Montgomery County
Melissa Glenn, Miami Valley African Association
Alfonso A. Orozco, Congressman, Consulting
Monica M. Schulte, MSS
Tom Wahls, executive director of the city of Dayton’s Human Relations Council.
Mila Ervin, Downtown Dayton Partnership.
Cheryl Scroggins, Wright State University.
Francisco J. Perez-Calza, Hispanic Ministerial Pastor, College Community Church.
Paul Purcell, president and CEO, Dayton Area Chamber of Commerce.

Tim Riordan
City manager.

"Dayton is progressive — this is nothing new. Dayton is always reaching out to other parts of the world," said Nalipco Glenn (right) of the Miami Valley African Association, during a roundtable discussion about the city of Dayton’s new immigrant-friendly policy. Also shown is Alvare Morista of Compositor Computador Infoprint. Storrs photo by TESSA MECAUM
Alvaro Mauricio: Where you see some of the pushback is in national interviews the mayor has done in the media and the questioning turns negative. I believe that setting the example and empowering immigrants needs to be done. This is a country burdened by immigrants. It's in our DNA, and it has turned us into a superpower. We can't change or stop that, and we need to have a willingness to accept people of all faiths and colors, and in Dayton to remind people of that.

Parkers: Well, I've heard from people at the base who retired here because they saw us a friendly community to begin with, and this plan elevates that. I've heard from business folks who are glad we're having this conversation, because the world is changing — by 2050, the minority population will be the majority population — and they realize we need to embrace that. It's who we are in America. But there are also some people who are afraid of it, and that's a shame. I have had some people come to me who have misconstrued the plan and said, "Phil, are we talking about illegal immigrants?" My response has been that we aren't promoting anything illegal, but we are trying to help solid, legal immigrants find a place to call home.

Wahab: If people are afraid, or have concerns that this is marginalizing them, that is not the intention of the plan, and we need to have a conversation about that. If you want to just talk and be against it, I'm ready to just go on. But if you want to really seriously engage on this, I'm ready to listen.

Parkers: I've had some people who had some fears who came to me just after the plan became public. Just to be clear: A very, very small number of people. But once you explain the vision, they get it. The few naysayers are minimal.

Ervin: I've had no negative reaction from anybody. A lot of people buy in.

But the plan does take a kind of don't-ask-don't-tell approach to the issue of illegal immigration. How much did you talk about that?

Wahab: We discussed it and realized some people could accuse us of catering to and attracting people who are here illegally, but we kept going. The plan accepts the reality that we already have people living here illegally and legally — and both are contributing to our community. The fix for this broken system isn't in our hands to alter; it's in our nation's hands. What we can do locally is deal with the circumstances we find ourselves in and go forth.

Stierdan: What the plan calls for the police to do is the policy our department and our chief were already following.

Schnitzel: I think the main reaction I've heard is, how do we take a humanitarian view and make it real? Is my neighborhood, most people ask, what does it mean? How do we get involved and help? We want to make sure we can sustain this five years or more.

Q: So, if this really works and we get a flood of new people? Are we prepared to deal with that?

Stierdan: If we had a really tremendous influx, we wouldn't be prepared. But in a lot of ways, the hospitals, social agencies and lots of institutions are already dealing with this. I think it will be a more gradual thing.

Parkers: I concur, this will be gradual. But wherere be challenges? Sure, you bet.

Q: So, any final thoughts?

Mauricio: I'm an immigrant, though lots of people don't know by looking at me. I was born in Venezuela, got naturalized, became a citizen — and I will say that the process I experienced, from first getting here to becoming the business owner I am now, this plan would have been really conducive to my success. Change is never easy, if this was easy, it would have been done many times already in many communities.

Ervin: I think people are celebrating their differences and starting to remember that America became great because it's a country of immigrants. We have a lot of problems and vast inequities, but I think we're really changing, and diversity will be one of our strengths.

Schnitzel: I see this as something that can really raise the morale of our city. The city is only as strong as the weakest person in it; that's sort of a cliché, but it's still true. We can help people who are at a disadvantage and have an important attitude toward them, everybody will benefit. It will bring the community together.

Mauricio: The alternative to this plan is stagnation. Get with it, or get lost. This has been in motion for a long time, and this is a testament to the adaptability of Dayton — and I think it will be copied by many other cities in the weeks and months to come.