



Kokomo summit goes global

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— Last year, a Chinese New Year's celebration in Kokomo drew around 200 participants. An international cooking festival at the Family Worship Center attracted cuisine from 21 nations around the world.

The City of Firsts is home to a thriving Indian cultural association, and the faculty of Indiana University Kokomo and the engineering staff of Delphi Electronics & Safety bring dozens of cultures into direct contact daily.

Why then, do so many people consider Kokomo to be just another homogenous Rust Belt Indiana town?

For about 20 participants at the Kokomo International Summit Thursday, the city's diversity and the way the city is perceived posed an obvious dilemma and many questions.

How do you raise the profile of ethnic diversity in a town that ranks well below the national average in foreign-born persons per capita? According to the 2000 census, only 2 percent of Kokomo's population was born outside the United States. The national average is 11 percent.

That means less than 1,000 of Kokomo's residents are foreign born.

At the same time, Kokomo is a huge recipient of foreign investment, thanks in large part to DaimlerChrysler's stake here.

And with the sudden effects of globalization changing our economy, can any city afford to ignore its own "homegrown" ties to the international community?

"Kokomo has far more global ties than we realize," Mayor Matt McKillip said. "We can run and grow with global possibilities, or we can retreat."

Grouped around tables at the Kokomo-Howard Chamber of Commerce, city officials, business professionals, educators and health care professionals took on the central issue Thursday, in what city officials say they hope will be a first step toward raising Kokomo's international profile.

For Robert Dible, assistant dean and professor of public affairs at IUK, the first step could be creating a unified liaison position, making sure that public events of an international flavor are brought to the public's attention.

For IUK director of international studies Linda Wallace, one of the keys is continuing to involve young people in exchange education opportunities, like the IUK's annual exchange with nursing schools in South Korea.

And for IUK School of Business Dean Niranjan Pati, establishing a sister city link is not out of the realm of possibility. Pati even came to the meeting armed with information about the South Korean city of Gimhae, a transportation and manufacturing hub located just outside of Pusan.

"You see the ticket counters at the airport, and there's a fabulous modesty in their customer service," Pati said. "We need to see the good things about other cultures. I believe South Korea is a country on the go. They basically survive on the global market."

Closer to home, Kokomo needs a better realization of its own international diversity, the discussion group agreed.

Kokomo businessman Mana Sriphet, a native of Thailand, said he's proud to be a member of the Kokomo community and of his 13 years in the United States.

And even though Sriphet doesn't speak Chinese, he said forging international sister city ties with a Chinese community simply makes good sense.

It would also be difficult to have a full discussion about local international diversity without some discussion on the realities of immigration law.

Sister Catherine Kelly, a vice president at St. Joseph Hospital, spoke on the difficulties of forging stronger ties with the local Hispanic community when so many members of that community are limited to migrant farm work.

That sparked musings by Pati, a native of India, and Dible, a native Nigerian, on the relative fairness of American

immigration laws. Both men said American laws are more fair than many other nations.

McKillip and others present said they hope the summit will simply jumpstart a trend in the community toward embracing internationalism and other cultures, a move away from insularity. But they admit it won't be easy.

"The reality in the city of Kokomo, for a fair number of citizens, is that we don't believe we have any diversity," Kelly said.

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