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The Gazette

Labour shortage hits suburbs hard: experts

Employers are running shuttle buses to bring in immigrants from Montreal

DAVID JOHNSTON, *The Gazette*

Published: Friday, April 04

Accelerating economic growth in the suburbs north of Montreal has produced a labour shortage so severe, local employers are increasingly running private shuttle buses to bring in immigrants from Montreal, job experts say.

The growing gap between a suburban jobs boom on the one hand and labour shortage on the other was highlighted with the release this week of 2006 federal census data on commuting patterns and places of work.

The census results show employment grew three times faster in Montreal's suburbs from 2001 to 2006 than it did in the central city of Montreal.

Job growth has been particularly strong in the suburbs north of Montreal and has sparked competition among area municipalities and employers for immigrant labour from Montreal.

"The problem is that public transit north of Montreal isn't very good, and so we, as employers, have had to get together ourselves to run our own shuttles into and out of Montreal for immigrants," said Gérard O'Hayon, owner of Farinex Ltd., a Boisbriand food maker.

Competition for newly arrived immigrant workers from Montreal has also begun to create tensions and resentment among suburban community groups vying for their services.

Community groups in municipalities that are on the periphery of Greater Montreal say they are angry that towns like St. Jérôme, farther from Montreal, are getting the lion's share of regional government grant money for immigrant-recruitment programs.

"That's not fair to communities in the lower Laurentians, like St. Eustache and Ste. Thérèse," said Claude Girard, co-ordinator of ABL Immigration, a community group based in St. Joseph du Lac, near Oka. ABL Immigration organizes bus tours of northern suburbs and industrial parks for new immigrants from Montreal.

Girard, who created his group in 2004, is organizing a bus tour of the town of Bois des Filion for immigrants next month.

Through these tours, immigrants get to meet employers and employers get to make direct pitches for their labour.

"With immigrants, there's a fear of getting lost in the suburbs on public transit," Girard said.

As a result, setting up private shuttle services to bring immigrants from Montreal to distant towns has become a cost of doing business in the suburbs, agreed Jacques Chapdelaine, an economist with Emploi-Québec,

The city of Laval's 5.1-per-cent unemployment rate last year was the second-lowest local jobless rate Quebec has ever seen. The lowest was the 4.9 per cent rate recorded last year in Quebec City, which has hardly any immigrants at all, and even fewer in its suburbs.

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Suburbs trump city for job growth

The release this week of 2006 census data on Canadians' places of work showed job growth in Montreal's suburbs to be about three times larger than employment growth in the city itself.

The suburbanization of employment is occurring in all large Canadian metropolitan areas. The high cost of land and municipal taxes in central cities have been factors in the job migration. The loss of commercial-property revenues has hurt central cities and helped suburbs.

Where the jobs are

2001 2006 Per cent change

Montreal 950,730 985,455 +3.7%

Suburbs 676,585 758,195 +12.1%

Note: "Montreal" is defined as the existing city of Montreal, taking the 2006 demergers into account. The term "suburbs" refers to autonomous municipalities on and off Montreal Island.

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