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YORK REGION IMMIGRANT PORTAL – A ONE STOP WEB SERVICE FOR IMMIGRANTS

The Planning and Economic Development Committee recommends the adoption of the recommendations contained in the following report dated March 25, 2008, from the Commissioner of Planning and Development Services:

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that:

1. This report be circulated by the Regional Clerk to local municipalities.
2. Staff of the Planning and Development Services Department be directed to report back to the Council on the operation of the York Region Immigrant Portal six months after its launch.

2. PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is to update Regional Council on the progress of the York Region Immigrant Portal implementation project. The Portal is a one stop web service providing all necessary information regarding York Region for prospective and landed immigrants.

3. BACKGROUND

3.1 GENERAL

The Region was a successful proponent for Provincial funding to develop the portal

In late 2006, the provincial Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration (MCI) distributed a call for proposals to municipalities to develop a municipal Immigration Information On-line Program (referred to in this report as an "Immigrant Portal"). This proposal call represented a second wave of funding to municipalities. London, Windsor, Ottawa, Sudbury and Ottawa were the successful recipients of the first round.

York Region engaged in a collaborative process with a wide range of community stakeholders serving immigrants to gain support for a funding application in response to the proposal call and made the necessary application at the end of 2006. The Region was

notified in March 2007 that it was one of eight municipalities awarded funding in this second proposal call. The one-time grant to the Region was in the amount of \$300,000.

The York Region Immigrant Portal (YRIP) has been adopted by the Human Services Planning Coalition (HSPC) as an important compliment to its Inclusivity Action Plan (IAP). A key IAP objective was to create a coordinated, integrated, user orientated and system wide response for newcomers settling and integrating into York Region communities.

The purpose of the portal is to provide information to immigrants to help them integrate more easily into York Region

As identified by MCI, the main objectives of the Immigrant Portal are to:

- Support the economic and social integration of newcomers to York region by providing user-friendly, seamless access to settlement information and services.
- Function as an on-line gateway that most effectively informs prospective immigrants and newcomers about opportunities, government's services and community support within York Region.
- Maximize resources available across institutions, save duplications of effort, while enhancing individual organization's ability to serve their own clients

4. ANALYSIS AND OPTIONS

The portal is ready to launch

The York Region Immigrant Portal was substantially complete and ready to launch at the beginning of April 2008. The Province has requested that the Portal be made publicly available at an official launch. The ceremony which may be attended by the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration is likely to take place in May 2008. Marketing and promotion of the Portal including its designated web site address will be conducted after the launch.

The process to develop the portal involved a wide range of community stakeholders

An important first step in the YRIP implementation project was to draw the community into the development process. The following steps were taken to ensure broad based community involvement and support throughout the project:

- Information session held on May 30th at the King Campus of Seneca College attended by 75 stakeholder representatives.
- Steering and Content Committees for the project were formed representing a wide representation of community stakeholders. Both committees were extensively and actively involved with providing direction on content and general project direction.

- Focus group sessions were held at the Welcome Centre Immigrant Services with 60 recently arrived immigrants referred by several settlement agencies to understand their information needs and requirements.
- Focus groups sessions were held with 40 representatives of agencies throughout York Region serving newcomers and immigrants to understand the information available to the Portal and how it could best be matched to the information needs expressed by immigrants.

The process to develop the portal involved a wide range of internal coordination

Several critical steps for the project involved extensive staff coordination.

The software platform for the Portal is IBM Websphere. IBM was selected as the successful proponent as a result of a procurement process undertaken in the last quarter of 2007. The procurement involved staff from Legal Services of the Corporate Services Department, Financial Services Branch, Information Technology Services and Supplies and Services of the Finance Department, and Human Services Planning Branch of the Planning and Development Services Department. IBM staff worked closely with Regional staff from Human Services Planning Branch, Information Technology Services and Corporate Communications Services Division in the deployment of the software and the design of the Portal site.

Corporate Communications staff worked closely with project staff to develop a Marketing Plan for the project. The plan describes a multi-pronged approach which concentrates on pushing marketing material to recently arrived immigrants to the Region. Marketing material will be made available at physical and virtual locations including settlement agencies' websites, the Welcome Centre, doctors taking new patients, and government offices. A concerted effort will also be made to ask a range of ethnic media to feature the Portal and for agencies that serve immigrants to electronically link and feature the Portal.

The portal content is comprehensive

The Portal contains comprehensive information for newcomers and prospective immigrants including:

- Vital information required in the first weeks a newcomer arrives such as what government documentation is required, and where to apply for it, placing of children in schools, how to open a bank account and establish credit, how to find a place to live and how to find settlement agencies that can assist in the integration process in the Region.

- Other information modules include the general themes of Living, Learning, and Working in York Region. Specific items include finding a job, economic development opportunities, the excellence of our rapid transit systems, how to navigate through our healthcare system, and the choices in our school systems and the many other attractions of the Region which make it a destination of choice for immigrants to Canada.
- Each local municipality is highlighted in its own section of the Portal, which outlines the general demographics of the municipality including its extent of cultural diversity, and features many positive assets which makes each municipality a desirable place to live, learn, work and play.

Discussions for on-going operation of the portal continue

The Region has had preliminary discussions with the Welcome Centre which has expressed an initial interest in managing the content of the Portal later this year. The Welcome Centre was named as the likely long term operator of the Portal in the submission which was made to the Province in order to secure the grant funding for the project. The Portal would strongly complement the Welcome Centre's client service model of being a one-stop Centre for newcomers and immigrants.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no direct financial implications to the Region in the implementation of the YRIP project. The costs associated with this project are covered in the one-time funding grant from MCI in the amount of \$300,000.

6. LOCAL MUNICIPAL IMPACT

The YRIP will positively impact the entire York Region community. Local municipalities play an important role in providing services to newcomers/immigrants. Much of the Portal content features local municipalities as destinations of choice and will help newcomers better integrate into their communities, in turn promoting inclusivity and continued economic growth and prosperity for all local municipalities.

7. CONCLUSION

The York Region Immigrant Portal was substantially complete at the beginning of April 2008. The Province has requested the portal be released at an official launching ceremony held later this spring.

On-going discussions are occurring with the Welcome Centre to manage the future content of the Portal.

For more information on this report, please contact Simon Cheng, Director, Human Services Planning at Ext. 1514.

The Senior Management Group has reviewed this report.