

Immigrant issues barely make agenda in civic campaign

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Immigrant advocates are worried the gaps in new Canadians' employment rates will worsen and their services will be the first to be chopped as the economy flounders and governments tighten their belts.

The concerns of Vancouver's immigrant communities were put to its mayoral contenders in a debate Friday at the Vancouver Public Library.

The discussion tackled everything from hate crimes to temporary foreign workers to the specific needs of ESL seniors.

But the responses of both the NPA's Peter Ladner and Vision Vancouver's Gregor Robertson were light on pledges as both candidates emphasized the need to curb city spending.

Nick Noorani, president of the Vancouver Multicultural Society and publisher of Canadian Immigrant magazine, said there is a huge need in Vancouver for better settlement programs. But he's worried they could decline as city budgets constrict.

Vancouver sees tens of thousands of new immigrants every year, 17 per cent of whom have no family or friends in the city, Noorani said.

For Tung Chan, CEO of the immigrant services group S.U.C.C.E.S.S., the biggest issue facing Vancouver's immigrants is simple: jobs.

"What we hear constantly is it's difficult to find the first job that matches their experience and training," Chan said. "From my perspective, employment obviously is the key."

Metro Vancouver's recent immigrants have twice the unemployment rates and earn less than half that of their Canadian-born peers, according to a recent report by the Vancouver Foundation. Chan fears these statistics will only get worse as the job market tightens.

Noorani said Vancouver's mayor should take a leadership role in lobbying senior governments for better accreditation recognition for foreign-trained professionals.

That's one of the promises in the Vision platform.

Robertson also pledged Friday to provide jobs with the city for new immigrants, implement the recommendations of a recent task force on immigration and pressure Ottawa to improve the immigration process.

Ladner's responses to the debate underscored his main campaign messages: cracking down on crime, housing affordability and improving Vancouver's business competitiveness. The NPA's platform contains no specific mention of immigrant issues. Ladner said Vancouver's new \$13-million 311 phone number will be a boon for immigrants looking for information on city services.

Both Noorani and Chan said they're worried immigrants don't have the information they need to vote Nov. 15.

Noorani's magazine conducted an informal online poll before the election campaign and found that 69 per cent of readers surveyed said they don't understand how the federal election process works. Noorani says that number is likely similar to the municipal election.

Many of Vancouver's immigrants from mainland China have never voted, Chan said.

"It's a whole new ball game," he said. "And it's confusing."

S.U.C.C.E.S.S. is launching an election hotline providing new Canadians with information on how to vote in Cantonese, Mandarin and English. The number is 604-408-7260, starting Wednesday.

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