

List of communities settling refugees could be expanded

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FREDERICTON • Settlement agencies in four New Brunswick communities will apply to be added to the list of places with the capacity to settle government-assisted Syrian refugees.

Edmundston, Bathurst, St. George/St. Stephen and Woodstock/Carleton County would like to be added to the list, New Brunswick Multicultural Council executive director Alex LeBlanc said. The federal government announced a call for proposals for new agencies to apply to receive government-assisted refugees on Thursday.

“Population decline is most acute in smaller communities around New Brunswick,” LeBlanc said. “Immigration is going to play a critical role for the vitality and prosperity of those communities.”

The list already includes Fredericton, Saint John and Moncton, with government-assisted refugees also settling in the outskirts of those communities, in Hampton, New Maryland and Quispamsis. Smaller communities can also raise money to privately sponsor families.

So far, refugees have only settled in predominantly English-speaking communities in New Brunswick. That could change if Bathurst and Edmundston are approved.

“There’s a huge support within the multicultural membership to see more francophone immigration,” LeBlanc said. “Being the only officially bilingual province in the country with multicultural associations all around the province, we’re in an excellent position to support more francophone immigration.”

House Leader and Beauséjour MP Dominic LeBlanc told Brunswick News earlier this week that his government is



Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour Minister Francine Landry says she supports former premier Frank McKenna’s plan to boost New Brunswick’s population. PHOTO: KARISSA DONKIN/LEGISLATURE BUREAU

committed to increasing the number of immigrants in New Brunswick, while respecting the province’s linguistic make-up.

“We don’t want to dilute the presence of French-speaking (New) Brunswickers by including a whole series of immigration streams that over time have the effect of diluting it,” the MP said.

“In fact, we can strengthen New Brunswick’s francophone population by bringing new Canadians here as well and that’s been a longtime commitment of the government. But the government hasn’t done very well on that, so it’s something we can do better.”

Settlement agencies from across the province met with Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour Minister Francine Landry in Fredericton on Friday to talk about how interest is growing beyond the major three cities to settle refugees.

Landry said she would like to see the list of communities eligible to settle government-assisted refugees expanded. But the federal government must be satisfied there are resources to help refugees settle, including access to affordable housing, transportation and health care.

The province, she said, wants to make sure settlement agencies know they support them in convincing refugees and immigrants to stay in the province.

“We want to work with them,” she told reporters. “We want to know if they have challenges, how they can work better. Also, how we can make sure the federal government is also aware of everything they need to make this a success story.”

Earlier this week, former premier Frank McKenna suggested immigrants should sign a “social contract” with the federal government that would see people granted citizenship in exchange for settling in areas with population

decline, such as New Brunswick.

When asked if she supports the idea floated by McKenna, Landry said, “absolutely.”

A spokeswoman for the minister later clarified that Landry supports the idea of encouraging immigrants to settle in areas with population decline, but not necessarily the part where immigrants must sign a contract.

In an interview with the *Telegraph-Journal* earlier this week, McKenna argued his plan is the only one that could move the dial on a population crisis he has been following since he was premier.

“It’s a very, very critical life-threatening situation for New Brunswick if we can’t arrest it,” McKenna said.

Creating such a program would be up to the federal government. Landry, who said population growth is a priority for her government, said she’s in “constant contact” with John McCallum, the federal minister of immigration, refugees and citizenship.

McCallum will be in St. Andrews this weekend for a cabinet retreat. Landry has asked for a meeting with him.

“But I’m not sure at this time if I will have one. They have a pretty full agenda.”

The idea has garnered support from Dominic LeBlanc too. He said the federal government could consider it.

“It’s no secret that our demographics are posing a very serious economic and social challenge to the province, so Mr. McKenna has been consistent and has been clear in saying that immigration is a critical part of the economic and social development of the province of New Brunswick. Our government shares that view.”

— *With files from Alan Cochrane of the Times & Transcript*