

Boosting Jamestown's 'Brain Gain'

By Jamestown Renaissance Corporation Staff

“Will the last one out of town please turn out the lights.”

Variations of this phrase have been uttered in Jamestown and countless other cities during economic downtimes. Real estate agents in Seattle even paid for billboards with this message in 1971 when that city was stricken by massive layoffs at Boeing.

Besides creating the dramatic imagery of an outbound stampede, clichés like this mask the complexity of population change. In almost any city not facing some imminent catastrophe, there are four moving parts to the population equation: people moving out, people moving in, people being born, and people passing away.

But most places tend to fixate on just one of these parts at a time--whichever best encapsulates a common experience or mood. In Jamestown, it's the 'people moving out' part that gets noticed the most, in part because most families have their own out-migration stories--seeing family members, neighbors, and friends off to the Carolinas, Nevada, Florida, or some other greener or warmer pasture.

Because we fixate on out-migration, it's conventional wisdom that Jamestown--and much of upstate New York--is emptying out at an unusual rate, creating waves of refugees with flat vowel pronunciations and excellent winter driving skills.

But it isn't true. As a report from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York demonstrated a few years ago, upstate New York doesn't have an out-migration problem--people move out at a rate comparable to most other states. Indeed, the population of the Jamestown area would not have remained in the 55,000 to 65,000 range for the past 70 years if it were hemorrhaging people.

What's unusual, though, is our low rate of in-migration. People move into Jamestown and upstate at insufficient rates to balance or overcome our normal rates of out-migration. Thus, the stable or gradually declining populations of most upstate regions.

So we need to focus on boosting in-migration, not lamenting those who've left. But how do we attract new residents? After all, the region's tepid job market has a hard time providing good jobs to local job seekers, let alone attracting people from outside.

More and more local employers, though, are reporting the difficulties they have filling open positions and competing with other regions for skilled workers. And more and more residents are finding that the region's low rents, reasonable cost of living, high quality of life, and access to major urban centers makes Jamestown a competitive place to operate a small business in the digital age--a good home base to work with clients from around the globe while benefiting from low overhead costs.

This is a strong message--but who do we sell it to, and how do we sell it? Right now, we don't. Our region's marketing infrastructure is mostly devoted to enticing tourists with information about our attractions: the museums and recreational assets that make our region a nice place to visit and live, but that aren't decisive factors in pulling new residents into the region. It's nice that Lucy and Roger Tory Peterson were from Jamestown--and certainly a point of pride--but nobody moves to Jamestown because of it.

We also market directly to businesses and corporate relocation specialists with information about available land and buildings, cheap utility rates, and tax incentives. But it's a low probability and increasingly outmoded strategy with lots of competition--and it hasn't done much over forty years to boost regional in-migration.

Instead, we need to focus on honing a marketing strategy for the most mobile demographic group--the one most likely to move from one place to another: young adults, roughly 25- to 39-year-olds, with college degrees. Because they're at a point in life with relatively few family obligations, a need to build résumés and the capacity to take risks, well-educated young adults are the most likely and willing group to move around.

What do we know about this demographic group that might inform an effective marketing effort? They're apt to delay marriage until their late 20s or 30s, and have few if any kids. As a result, they tend to prefer city living, where they have access to numerous amenities to occupy their free time and housing much more suitable to singles and small households.

Because they're highly mobile--and may not stay for more than a few years--they're also less likely to participate in formal civic organizations or activities, instead preferring the company of peers or clubs that share their specific interests.

Targeting this particular group doesn't require scrapping what we already have in our marketing toolbox, but fine-tuning the message and the format.

Imagine a Web site that uses the three following approaches to reach this group:

- A focus on the assets that appeal to young adults: urban living opportunities in downtown Jamestown and historic neighborhoods, downtown dining, coffee shops and entertainment, and weekend recreational opportunities within an easy drive;
- Stories about young entrepreneurs able to test their dreams due to low rents and real estate prices;
- A listing of professional job opportunities, giving businesses and organizations a chance to advertise their best jobs directly to young, mobile professionals.

By pairing a targeted pitch to young professionals with a listing of the area's best jobs, Jamestown can actively reach out to the people who are most likely to move here and help local businesses sell young people on their companies and the region simultaneously.

The Jamestown Renaissance Corporation is currently working with the city's Strategic Planning and Partnerships Commission on a strategy to implement this concept. Tell us what you think. How would you convince a young professional to give Jamestown a chance?