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Labour

British Columbia looks toward Ontario to recruit workers

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The British Columbia government is undertaking a recruitment initiative in Ontario early next year, in an effort to help British Columbia construction companies hire new workers.

The Minister of Economic Development, Colin Hansen, sent out an invitation to B.C. businesses on Nov. 28 to participate in a series of job fairs in southern Ontario.

The job fairs are being held in Kitchener-Waterloo, Windsor, Hamilton and Toronto between Feb. 26 and 28.

According to a ministry fact sheet, the government recruitment initiative aims to help companies in all economic sectors recruit new workers.

The job fair will target a range of potential employees, including youth, recent immigrants, professionals, skilled and entry-level labour, early and mid-career managers and project managers.

“If you go back ten years in B.C., there was a fairly significant out-migration and unemployment was at 10 per cent,” Hansen said.

“In the last four years of the 1990s, there was a net outflow of 50,000 people due to inter-provincial migration.”

However, the economic landscape has changed over the years.

“Today, there is a complete reversal of that situation. B.C. is leading Canada with 400,000 jobs created since the late 1990s and a phenomenal rate of growth,” he said.

“In the last four years ending in 2006, about 22,000 people migrated from other provinces to B.C.”

Hansen said he sees the Ontario labour market as an opportunity for B.C. businesses due in part to layoffs in the manufacturing and forestry sectors.

“I think we need to encourage more labour mobility in Canada, not less,” he said.

“We are trying to get the message out. We are inviting back B.C. people who left or anybody else who wants to come to B.C.”

The government initiative is good news to the construction industry in B.C, said the head of the province’s construction association.

“The nature of the initiative is consistent with what we are doing overseas. What we do overseas is match prospective employers with workers, which takes the uncertainty out of the decision to move,” said Manley McLachlan, president of the British Columbia Construction Association (BCCA).

“So, it seemed like a good fit for us. If you look at the companies we represent, they are all small companies. It may be an easier option for small companies to recruit inside Canada.”

According to McLachlan, recruitment from other provinces may be easier than other countries because some of the barriers to migration don’t exist, such as language, accreditation and the culture of construction.

He also said that labour mobility is a simple fact of life.

“It happens everyday. It is the nature of the game we are involved in,” he said.

Regina Brodersen, BCCA director of human resources has attended job fairs in Germany, England, Scotland and Mexico.

She said that she can see the advantages of luring Canadian workers to British Columbia.

To me it seems it may be easier to recruit from Ontario. Whoever wants to come out will come out.”

The BCCA is in the early stages of making plans to attend the Ontario job fairs. “We are in the process of talking to companies who may be interested,” said Brodersen.

Andy Manahan, executive director of the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario said that he understands why B.C. construction companies would look east.

“Years ago, when I was looking at inter-provincial trade barriers the philosophy was that it should be a two-way street. The problem is that there are also shortages in Ontario,” he said

“If Ontario has a steady stream of projects, recruitment by other provinces should not be a problem.”

David Zurawel, vice president policy and government relations with the Council of Ontario Construction Associations (COCA) agreed.

“Canada as a whole is facing a significant shortage of skilled labour, so all provinces are in the same boat. B.C. will have to recruit skilled labour to meet this challenge,” he said.

Ontario has a similar demographic as B.C., with the domestic population being sustained through immigration.

“In the near future, Ontario will also have to deal with labour force attrition through the retirement of baby boomers,” said Zurawel.

“These are challenges we will all have to face.”