

Local economy needs influx of immigrants, banking official Rose Zitiello says

[Scott Stephens/Plain Dealer Reporter](#) October 13, 2008 08:20AM

Categories: [Business Impact](#), [Real Time News](#), [neighborhoods](#)



Lisa DeJong/The Plain Dealer Rose Zitiello, photographed in Cleveland City Hall, is a community development specialist who says having more immigrants would help Cleveland's economy rebound. To some, immigration is a problem waiting to be solved. To Rose Zitiello, it's a resource waiting to be tapped.

Zitiello, manager of bank relations for Cleveland, fancies herself a builder of multicultural bridges. A community-development specialist, Zitiello believes immigrants are a key to Cleveland's economic rebound and can help revitalize a sagging housing market.

It's a sermon she has preached from many pulpits: as a board member for the Cleveland Council on World Affairs, as a co-chair of the Northeast Ohio Immigrant Minority Business Alliance and as vice president of the Justinian Forum, a distinguished Italian-American legal society with more than 500 members nationwide.

Zitiello, a Pennsylvania native, is the unofficial historian of her Detroit-Shoreway neighborhood, in which she has lived for 28 years. She and her husband, Peter, live in a

renovated building that was put up in 1906 by Peter's relatives and that served as a boarding house, tavern and church.

She spoke about banking, immigration and the challenges of keeping a 100-year-old building in good repair:

Q. What have you been working on?

A. We're always looking for ways to improve access to banks for residents and business owners, primarily in the city. We're looking at a project in its second year called Bank on San Francisco. It started with the goal of getting 20,000 residents who didn't have bank accounts into some kind of banking relationship. If you don't have that relationship, you're left out of the system. We're looking at replicating that in Cleveland and Northeast Ohio.

Q. You've said that very small businesses, often operated by immigrants, can really help drive the economy. How are we doing?

A. The number of microbusiness enterprises in Ohio -- defined as a business with five or fewer employees -- runs behind the national average. Many of these businesses are started by single moms out of their home. It can be things like catering, jeweler, baby-sitting or pet grooming. It's really an opportunity for people who aren't in the mainstream to get into the economy. It's a huge part of our economy, but we are behind the national average.

Q. Why is that?

A. I'm not really sure, but less than 4 percent of our residents [in Ohio] are foreign-born. We're not getting that constant influx of new ideas and energy. We're even behind in attracting migration from other states. Maybe we're not doing enough to welcome them.

Q. Why has immigration become a polarizing issue in the national political debate?

A. Supporting immigration is not a popular position. People have a lot of negative perceptions, especially after 9/11. I'm not saying Cleveland's population should be back up to 1 million, but you do need some new people to keep things vibrant. We have 1,200-square-foot bungalows that are empty because we want to live in McMansions. But for first-time homeowners from Kosovo or Albania, those are like palaces.

Q. How's your own house doing?

A. Living in a 100-year-old house is not for the faint of heart. My husband spent the whole day yesterday replacing a door. We had to finally break down and put in central air. When my mother comes to visit, she can't stand the heat. But the neighborhood is doing great.

