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A changing landscape as immigrants transform Main Streets

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WILLMAR, MINN.

Once the henna artist arrives, business will really take off, Yonis Hajisaid said.

One of downtown Willmar's newest entrepreneurs, he owns the Nuura Shop, the latest Somali-owned business to open in downtown Willmar in the past five years.

The change from a barber shop to a henna and perfume parlor is a sign of how new immigrants are transforming business districts outstate just as they have along some main streets in Minneapolis and St. Paul.

Drawn to Willmar because of jobs at the Jennie-O meatpacking plants, a growing number of Somali immigrants are calling this west-central Minnesota town home and opening small businesses on the side.

The official count says 700 of Willmar's 19,610 residents are originally from Somalia, but city officials and Somali community leaders say the real number is at least 2,000. The city's Latino population has leveled off at 4,099 according to the latest U.S. census data.

In cities such as Rochester and Faribault, too, new immigrants have arrived, adding new flavors and customers to downtown areas.

"Main Streets in many smaller Minnesota communities have not fared so well the last 25 or 30 years," said Bill Blazar, an executive at the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce. "The growth of immigrant populations and the businesses that are a direct result really are a shot in the arm. They're an economic development program."

The changes have also created angst for some residents.

"For those who have been here a long time, it's a lot different," said Ken Warner, president of the Willmar Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce. "It's never going to be like it once was, and there's plenty of opportunity to make it viable again."

Goat meat, phone cards

In a nod to the growing Somali presence in outstate communities, a Minneapolis-based agency that offers technical support to help African immigrants run their businesses has planted flags in Willmar and Rochester.

Yusuf Ahmed heads up the Willmar branch office of the African Development Center of Minnesota, which opened downtown last September. The building, painted a vivid green and orange, stands out among the red-bricked edifices surrounding it.

"Somalis, by nature I tell you, are entrepreneurs," Ahmed said, smiling. Many pull a night shift at the turkey processing plant and run their business on the side, with help from their families.



Immigrant-owned stores are springing up in outstate cities. Nurto Ali and her daughter Amina Abdulkadir run a beauty store called Nuura in Willmar.

Richard Tsong-Taatarii, Star Tribune

19,610
Willmar population
700 to 2,000
Somali population
13 and counting
Somali-run businesses
Willmar population: 19,610 Somali population: 700-at least 2,000 Somali-run businesses: 13 and counting

A recent survey of more than a dozen African-owned businesses in Willmar, conducted by the ADC and the city's chamber of commerce, drew 11 complete responses. It found that almost all were established in the past five years, and more than a third opened in the past year. The vast majority of the 11 African-owned businesses in Willmar surveyed are stores; they sell everything from food to books to gifts to housewares.

Most Somali business owners have never run a business before and lack formal training, the survey found. But they hire people. The 11 businesses have created about 23 full-time jobs and 16 part-time jobs. The vast majority of employees are African immigrants, according to the survey.

Walking through the streets of Willmar earlier this week, Ahmed stopped at what is widely believed to be the first Somali-owned business in town -- a corner store with a sign that reads: "Bihi's Shop. Goat meat. Dry goods. Phone cards. Dairy."

Outside the former paint store, two Somali men sat on a park bench beneath the grocery's large picture window. Inside, the items sold include diapers, cereal, large bottles of sesame oil for cooking, plastic tubs full of dates and burlap sacks of basmati rice.

Right next to the store, Bihi runs a café. The bar stools and lunch counter inside the restaurant are remnants of the old Town Talk Bakery -- a social hub that drew people from all over the city and surrounding towns, recalled Richard Hoglund, lifelong Willmar resident and former mayor.

After the bakery closed, he said, a new restaurant run by a Latino immigrant opened. Now, it's the Bihi Restaurant.

Back in the day, he said, downtown Willmar was the commercial and social center for the region. That changed in the 1960s, after the Kandi Mall was built outside of downtown and the department stores followed. Then came the big-box stores, and the rest is history, Hoglund said.

Downtown got a boost when Latino immigrants started to arrive in large numbers in the early 1990s. They opened businesses and over time, their businesses evolved to include law offices, insurance agencies and real estate offices. Roberto Valdez is the program coordinator of the Willmar Area Multicultural Market, a nonprofit agency downtown that helps immigrants start their own businesses. He said from 2005 to 2010, the number of ethnic-owned businesses in the Willmar area has jumped from 3 to 42.

Rosita's Barbacoa is one. Owned by Alberto Gasca, originally from Mexico, the restaurant serves burritos, tacos and cheeseburgers to a mostly white office crowd during the week, and to mostly Latinos on the weekends. "If you took all these businesses out it would be like a ghost town," said Gasca, who also owns La Fiesta, a downtown grocery.

Like Willmar, the city of Faribault and its local Jennie-O plant have attracted many immigrants in recent years, first Latinos and more recently Somalis.

The newest settlers have opened up businesses in town, helping to keep the downtown area's occupancy rate high. "If we've got 11 immigrant-owned businesses, that's potentially 11 storefronts that aren't empty," said Royal Ross, director of a program called Faribault Main Street.

Faribault was one of five cities chosen from around the state for the Preservation Alliance of Minnesota's Main Street program, dedicated to enhancing and preserving the state's downtown areas at a time when many are dying.

Most of the 11 immigrant-owned businesses in Faribault cater to immigrant customers, but there has been some crossover, Ross said. For instance, a bakery owned by a Latino family sells fruit turnovers enjoyed by everyone.

A little culture shock

Still, the new Faribault has been an adjustment for some residents.

"For a small town in southern Minnesota, to have this type of immigrant growth, it is a cultural shock to us a little bit," Ross said. "It's neither good nor bad. It's just different."

Large groups of Somali men tend to congregate at day's end on downtown Faribault sidewalks, speaking Somali and often not

moving out of the way for others walking by. The practice has annoyed and even intimidated some people in town, said Ross, who was prompted to write about the issue last week in a mass e-mail that was republished in the local newspaper.

"That's the way they get together and exchange information," he said of the Somali sidewalk conventions. "They get together and they really talk. We're not used to seeing large groups congregating in public areas like that. We have to get used to how each other operates."

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