

WHAT DOES COVID-19 MEAN FOR IMMIGRATION TO N.B.?

Analysis

ANDREW WAUGH
POLITICAL EDITOR

This is part in an ongoing series examining how the pandemic is impacting New Brunswick and what comes next.

They're proof that New Brunswick's COVID-19 success has been noticed across the planet.

Sushanta Kumar Sahu, his wife Pragnya Parimita Nayak, and their four-year-old son Ritvij Sahu moved to Canada at the end of July, leaving the Middle Eastern country of Qatar, bound for Fredericton. They're



COVID-19: What now?

originally from India, but have moved internationally for work several times.

In the midst of a pandemic storm, they searched for – and found – a safe

port.

It wasn't an easy trip. The family travelled from Qatar to Turkey, then to Toronto, and then to Fredericton. The city's status as the capital, and its focus on the tech sector, were attractive, said Sahu, who works in information technology.

But there was another big factor.

Sahu did his research and concluded that Fredericton, and the province as a whole, has been "extremely well managed" throughout the pandemic. That sealed the deal, and it's "fair to say" that's the biggest reason the family is here.

"A few months after COVID started, my analysis was ... that New Brunswick

is an absolute ideal place, even in the Atlantic bubble, to be in at this point in time," he said. "So that's of course a very positive point."

And now, as a member of the New Brunswick Provincial Nominee Program, he's free to work anywhere inside the border. Sahu's hoping his resumé will land him a job in the tech sector soon, and he's "actively looking and seeking opportunities."

Families like Sahu's are the ones Premier Blaine Higgs likely dreams about.

Successive governments have pinned their long-term economic plans on skilled immigrants being a

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Sushanta Kumar Sahu, his wife Pragnya Parimita Nayak, and their four-year-old son Ritvij Sahu moved to Canada at the end of July, choosing Fredericton as their new home. PHOTO: AIDAN COX/THE DAILY GLEANER

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big part of the answer to New Brunswick's labour force woes. The population is aging, and workers are retiring at a faster pace than new ones are joining.

But what does immigration look like in a pandemic?

Are other families noticing New Brunswick's COVID success, and will it convince them to come?

And once they're here, how do we convince them to stay?

The 'key issue'

It's easy, and logical, to assume that COVID-19 brought immigration to New Brunswick to a screeching halt. Borders were closed, flights were massively reduced, and across the world, people hunkered down, trying to ride out the chaos until a vaccine arrives.

And it's fair to ask questions about whether the pandemic has, now and in the future, fundamentally altered the nature of immigration.

immigration file, which she took over two days earlier, the rookie Saint John Harbour MLA – now charged with running four ministerial portfolios – stresses that she's barely even hit the ground, and is hardly running.

So when she's told that her answers will be seen through that lens, she's thankful. But that doesn't mean Dunn, who speaks quickly and with obvious enthusiasm, has nothing to say. Briefings on the file have already begun, and when she spoke to Brunswick News, she was less than 24 hours away from an introductory chat with her federal counterparts.

"Obviously immigration is going to be a key focus for us moving forward, in terms of economic recovery," Dunn said. "Maintenance ... as well as growth and prosperity."

She then, like LeBlanc, noted that COVID hasn't stopped the immigration process, citing the strong application numbers while acknowledging the "congestion" on the federal side.

But there's anecdotal evidence that suggests COVID-19 hasn't been a negative game changer here – so far.

In fact, the opposite may be true. Alex LeBlanc, the executive director of the New Brunswick Multicultural Council, has been immersed in the immigration file for years. And a recent conversation he had with provincial immigration officials painted a brighter picture than some might expect.

"Most people would be surprised to know that while immigration is very different right now, the work of bringing people here is continuing," he said.

The province, he said, has nominated 1,466 newcomers to date in 2020, LeBlanc said, a slight rise from 1,418 from the same time last year.

"People now have the ability to come, settle and stay, but they may have to do some more careful planning around when they can come, and do that safely. The people immigrating here have to self-isolate for 14 days, and settlement agencies are supporting them to build those plans and find accommodations for that," LeBlanc said.

But there's another statistic that really matters: landings. How many immigrants actually got here.

Brunswick News asked the province for this year's landings numbers, but no data was provided.

"There's been significant delays in processing at the federal level. Obviously, [Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada's] work has become much more complicated," LeBlanc said. "But it's hopeful to see how well the province has adapted, continuing to nominate people, continuing recruitment efforts – albeit virtual."

The "key issue," LeBlanc said, is that "employers are still coming forward with talent shortages." He cited Cooke Aquaculture's recent call for 100 workers. And they aren't alone, he said.

"Our working population is being drained [by retirements]. The main solution to that is to bring more young families here to join the province."

Getting them here, even in a pandemic, is the "easy part," LeBlanc said.

Getting them to stay is a different story. New Brunswick's five-year immigration retention rate hovers right around 50 per cent, meaning one of every two immigrants who land in this province move somewhere else in Canada relatively soon after.

Our COVID success

Arlene Dunn appreciates the latitude, and realizes she's in a "honeymoon period."

Asked to weigh in on the

"There's lots of folks who want to come here, and for good reason. The province is in great shape [in regard to COVID-19]."

"The premier and the team and the folks around him managed it very well. And we've got lots of people looking at New Brunswick who may not have before."

If that's true, there's an obvious next question: will there be anywhere for them to live when they get here?

'Systemic challenges'

It was a white-hot summer in the Canadian real estate market, and New Brunswick was no exception. Pent-up demand after an extended lockdown, and a fundamental mentality change on working from home, combined to send prices soaring.

That action, combined with voters complaining about rising rents, caught the premier's eye on the campaign trail.

Richard Saillant noticed too. "The issue here is if you're going to be seeing increases in rents of about \$250 a month, how will you be expanding your immigration levels when ... rents are shooting through the roof?" the economist and public policy expert recently told Brunswick News.

"So the issue will be for government to deal with the looming housing crisis, or else support for immigration could drop to levels that are not really comfortable for our province."

He's right, said LeBlanc, returning to the biggest challenge: convincing immigrants to stay.

"It may sound flippant to say during a pandemic, but getting people here is the easy part. We've got some systemic challenges in New Brunswick that need serious, focused effort if we're going to be successful in the long term," LeBlanc said.

"Affordable housing is already a significant challenge, for New Brunswickers and newcomers alike."

And the council's "conservative" projections, he said, show that New Brunswick will welcome between 75,000 and 80,000 new permanent residents in the next decade.

"What kind of housing situation will they be arriving to? What kind of employment opportunities will they have?" LeBlanc asked.

"Will they have support to get their credentials recognized? Will they see themselves reflected in government offices and other positions of leadership throughout the community?"

Good answers to those questions, LeBlanc said, involve "a lot of work" that New Brunswick still has to do.