

local news

▼ LABOUR

Okanagan employers turning their attention to Jamaica

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The Okanagan is looking to Jamaica for help with its labour shortage.

A new initiative between Okanagan College and the Central Okanagan's Economic Development Commission is going to bring Jamaican workers and students to the area. Representatives of the college, the EDC and local businesses are heading to Jamaica next week for the second time in less than two months.

One of those businesses, Greyback Construction, has applied to the federal government for the right to bring over as many as 40 Jamaican workers during the next two years to work on construction projects, including the new William R. Bennett Bridge.

"We expect, especially on the bridge project, to have Jamaican workers by the end of the summer," said general manager Terry Brown.

He is going to Jamaica to interview prospective employees. Getting the full contingent of 40 will depend on finding candidates with the needed skills.

Brown is looking for experienced trades people, who besides being able to do the necessary work, can act as mentors to his apprentices.

"This is a tremendous opportunity as an employer to broaden the depth of skilled workers," he said.

He added most of the Jamaican applicants have five to 15 years experience.

The delegation to Jamaica will be guests of honour at a reception at the Canadian High Commission on Tuesday. They will also meet with Jamaican Prime Minister Portia Simpson-Miller and other government officials and the college will sign agreements with several Jamaican counterparts.

As a result, there will be a flow of Jamaican students to Okanagan College.

"While we can't exactly quantify how many students will come, we know there will be dozens in the first year and that will grow in the years to follow," said college president Jim Hamilton.

"We have already received a substantial number of applications for the coming school year."

As well, graduates of Jamaican business diploma programs will be able to transfer into the college's Bachelor of Business Administration degree program.

The initiative was launched at the suggestion of new OC business professor Michael Patterson, who also facilitated contact between the college, the EDC and the Jamaican government.

Patterson was born in Jamaica and used to work at the London Metropolitan Univer-



AIDRIAN NIEOCZYM/CAPITAL NEWS

OKANAGAN COLLEGE business professor Michael Patterson talks at a news conference on Friday about how he helped facilitate an initiative to bring Jamaican students and workers to the Okanagan.

sity in England.

Patterson and his family arrived in Kelowna in January. He immediately noticed all the help wanted ads.

He also noticed how the area's cultural make-up is almost exclusively white.

"I thought a little cultural diversity would be healthy," he said.

"I also thought I could assist employers find workers."

Patterson noted the U.S.

and the U.K. have been hiring Jamaican workers for years.

He said he did not think there would be many problems integrating the new workers into Okanagan communities.

He said in the six months he and his family have been here he has not encountered anything but warmth and hospitality.

He emphasized the migration of Jamaicans will not

be a "saturation," but rather a "sprinkling" and the people coming here will be skilled workers making a big economic contribution to the region.

He also pointed out Jamaica is itself a multicultural society and that lots of Jamaicans are used to working abroad.

He said Jamaican workers will not only help the overheated Okanagan economy but the remittances they send home will boost the Jamaican economy as well.

"We were admittedly a bit skeptical," said EDC director Robert Fine before leaving on the first trip to Jamaica in April.

"We went in with medium expectations."

But the EDC was impressed with the welcome its delegation received, the interest the Jamaican government had in working with them and the skill levels of the workers interested in coming to Canada.

The workers coming over would be on temporary worker's visa. Brown said he's asked the government for two-year permits. He said Jamaican workers would be paid the same as similarly quali-

fied and experienced Canadians. A journeyman carpenter can make between \$20 to \$30 an hour, with supervisors and foremen making more.

As for integrating the new workers into the work sites, he said he didn't expect any more

resistance than normal.

He pointed out construction is still a machismo industry and people tend to protect their turf but if the new employees do good work, "they'll be accepted."

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