

# NEW AMERICA FOUNDATION

## WORKFORCE & FAMILY PROGRAM

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### MEXIKOTA: THE PLAIN STATES' RUN FOR THE BORDER

By David Gray\*

In the wake of terrorist threats, gas price spikes, hurricanes, and a run-up in housing prices in certain markets, there has been broad discussion recently about the value to the U.S. of encouraging greater development in the nation's interior. Population growth along America's coasts is crowding more people into ever smaller areas, while the interior of the country remains relatively open. As the U.S. population is projected to grow to 400 million in the next half century, America has an incentive to encourage people on the coasts to settle inland. A policy to encourage migration to the Plains states would have a positive impact on the overcrowded coasts and bring needed human capital to the middle of the country. There have been many policy proposals (see Joel Kotkin, "Hinterland Ahoy!", *Wall Street Journal*, 9/27/05) to encourage such movement. However, part of the challenge of encouraging migration might lie not in policy, but in the perception people have of these inland states.

In 2001, legislators in North Dakota discussed changing the name of the state to, simply, Dakota, in order to encourage such migration. Apparently, they were concerned that the "North" in the state's name detours tourists, businesspeople and potential residents who believe that North Dakota has only a desolate climate as depicted in the movie, *Fargo*.

This discussion has prompted interest from a variety of sources. *Businessweek* magazine printed a cartoon of a few happy "Dakota" residents in shorts surfing through several feet of snow. A skit on the *Late Show with David Letterman* offered that South Dakota should also try to encourage such migration inland and respond to North Dakota's proposed change by changing its name to "North Dakota," with a slogan, "North Dakota, it's south of Dakota."

Such a discussion of changing a state's name to attract more settlement is what we in the academe refer to as "geographical marketing." That is, the creation of a new

name, or brand equity, that helps improve the image of an entity so as to change how people view that entity.

Geographical marketing certainly applies to cities, states, and territories. Why do you think tourists stop for a beer in Dublin, Ohio, pause for a sidewalk coffee at Paris, Texas, or pull to the side of the road in Intercourse, Pennsylvania? The Bureau of Tourism in Greenland should win a blue ribbon for picking its name (neighbor Iceland should try to hire these folks away).

Consistent with a policy of "homesteading," or encouraging people to move to the Plains, geographical marketing might help many a state. South Dakota, for example, might consider changing its name to Mexikota, to attract people from the coasts, particularly the south.

I can see the commercials now:

- Cliff-diving in Sioux Falls, the Acapulco of the Prairies.
- "It's a whole new latitude," a guy in shorts sits in a lounge-chair drinking a Corona in Rapid City, "the place where you go to slow down."
- Pierre, renamed "Pedro," could borrow from the movie, *Waiting for Guffman*, for its residents would now be "costal," if you count the Missouri River as a coast.

Mexikota might even attract some unexpected tourists—college students who can't afford Cancun, Canadians who couldn't get another flight from O'Hare, Minnesotans who never bothered to learn Spanish.

Mexikota would be bold, and help encourage the migration that could strengthen development in America's interior. Such a move could have a positive impact on America's future. Ole!

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