

# STATEN ISLAND BUSINESS TRENDS

## Immigrant entrepreneurs on Staten Island

By **JONATHAN BOWLES**

In recent years, Staten Island leaders have sought to kick-start the local economy by embracing everything from artists and biotech companies to sports arenas. While some of these areas do have potential to stimulate growth, a more rewarding – if decidedly less glamorous – answer for the borough's economic problems is hiding in plain sight: the borough's growing immigration population.

During the past decade, immigrants have been the entrepreneurial sparkplugs of cities from New York to Los Angeles – starting a greater share of new businesses than native-born residents, stimulating growth in various sectors, creating loads of new jobs and transforming once-sleepy neighborhoods into thriving commercial centers. Immigrants are starting to have this kind of impact on Staten Island, but demographic trends suggest that these entrepreneurs should be an even more powerful force for the borough in the decade ahead.

During the 1990s, Staten Island's overall population grew by 17 percent (64,751) but the foreign-born population grew by 43 percent (28,107). Meanwhile, the borough's share of foreign-born residents catapulted from 11.8 percent in 1990 to 16.4 percent a decade later. The first five years of this decade produced an even greater influx. Between 2000 and 2005, immigrants made up a whopping 93 percent of the borough's population growth – accounting for 19,404 of the 20,802 net increase in residents.

These trends have already translated into a significant increase in new businesses. The number of foreign-born individuals on Staten Island who are self-employed increased from 3,500 in 1990 to 5,500 in 2000, a 57 percent jump. That's an increase of 2,000 people who are starting their own businesses.

Overall, more than 10 percent of foreign-born people in the workforce on Staten Island are self-employed, versus 6 percent of all native-born individuals on the island. These immigrant entrepreneurs have already begun to help breathe new life into long-depressed neighborhoods across the

borough, from Port Richmond to stretches of Victory Boulevard and Bay Street.

While these entrepreneurs are likely to be increasingly important to Staten Island's economic future, they will need the support and attention of the borough's policymakers and leading business development organizations to realize their full potential. Many of them will face significant obstacles in starting and growing a business – hurdles that go beyond what native-born entrepreneurs experience, from simply understanding local regulations to having difficulty accessing start-up capital.

Staten Island's government and business leaders should look to play a larger role in nurturing the growth of the borough's immigrant and minority businesses. Business groups can start by aggressively expanding their membership to include more of these businesses and scheduling some of their meetings and events at immigrant- or minority-owned restaurants and catering halls. They should also look to hold business planning seminars and other educational events for business owners in conjunction with groups that have credibility with immigrant and minority entrepreneurs, such as the West Brighton Community Local Development Corporation, which now operates the borough's only microfinancing programs for entrepreneurs, as well as several of the borough's existing immigrant-run nonprofits and city-wide microenterprise organizations like ACCION New York and the New York Association of New Americans.

Immigrant entrepreneurs clearly won't be the only growth engine for Staten Island in the years ahead. But with the right support, the borough's fast-growing and highly entrepreneurial immigrant population could be an important component of a healthy and growing economy.

**Jonathan Bowles**, the director of The Center for an Urban Future, authored the Staten Island 2020 report for the Staten Island Economic Development Corp. More information can be found at the Center's Web site, [www.nycfuture.org](http://www.nycfuture.org).