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# THE REBIRTH OF FIELDS CORNER: VIETNAMESE IMMIGRANT ENTREPRENEURS AND THE REVITALIZATION OF A BOSTON NEIGHBORHOOD\*

PAUL WATANABE\*\*

## INTRODUCTION

Although somewhat later than other major urban areas, Boston has been experiencing fundamental demographic changes. The 2000 Census reported that for the first time non-Hispanic whites constitute a minority of the city's population.<sup>1</sup>

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\* This Article is based on a presentation given by Paul Watanabe at the Third Annual Conference on Entrepreneurship and Community Economic Development on October 17, 2008. This conference is hosted by Western New England College Law and Business Center for Advancing Entrepreneurship. The theme for the 2008 conference was "Entrepreneurship in a Global Economy." The presentation and this Article are substantially derived from a study conducted by Paul Watanabe, Ramón Borges-Méndez, and Michael Liu for the Immigrant Learning Center, Inc., a nonprofit adult learning center that "provide[s] free English classes to immigrant and refugee adults to give them sufficient knowledge of English to lead productive lives in the United States." See ILC Mission, <http://www.ilctr.org/about/mission.asp> (last visited May 15, 2009). The full text of the study can be found on the Immigrant Learning Center's website. See RAMÓN BORGES-MÉNDEZ, MICHAEL LIU, & PAUL WATANABE, IMMIGRANT LEARNING CTR., INC., IMMIGRANT ENTREPRENEURS AND NEIGHBORHOOD REVITALIZATION: STUDIES OF THE ALLSTON VILLAGE, EAST BOSTON AND FIELDS CORNER NEIGHBORHOODS IN BOSTON (2005), available at [http://www.ilctr.org/news/pdf/Immigrant\\_Entrepreneurs.pdf](http://www.ilctr.org/news/pdf/Immigrant_Entrepreneurs.pdf).

\*\* Paul Watanabe is Director of the Institute for Asian American Studies and Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Massachusetts Boston. He is a member of the Board of Directors of the Nisei Student Relocation Commemorative Fund and the American Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts. He is the author of *Ethnic Groups, Congress, and American Foreign Policy* and principal author of *A Dream Deferred: Changing Demographics, New Opportunities, and Challenges for Boston*. See PAUL Y. WATANABE, *ETHNIC GROUPS, CONGRESS, AND AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY: THE POLITICS OF THE TURKISH ARMS EMBARGO* (1984); PAUL WATANABE ET AL., *A DREAM DEFERRED: CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS, NEW OPPORTUNITIES, AND CHALLENGES FOR BOSTON* (1996). Watanabe received his PhD in Political Science from Harvard University.

1. CHARLES JONES, UNIV. OF MASS., MAURICIO GASTÓN INST. FOR LATINO CMTY. DEV. & PUB. POL'Y, *LATINOS IN BOSTON 1* (2003), available at [http://www.gaston.umb.edu/articles/Latinos\\_Bos.pdf](http://www.gaston.umb.edu/articles/Latinos_Bos.pdf).

Immigration has been a major factor in this diversification. A recent report shows that over the last fifteen years more than twenty-two thousand new immigrants have annually settled in Massachusetts.<sup>2</sup> The foreign-born as a percentage of the population grew from 9.4% in 1980 to 14.3% in 2004.<sup>3</sup>

The sources of immigration are found increasingly in the southern part of the globe. Over the last twenty-five years, immigrants came most frequently from the Caribbean and Asia, followed by Central and South America, Europe, and Africa. About one of every two immigrants entering Massachusetts from 2000 to 2004 was from Latin America or the Caribbean; another one of every four was from Asia.<sup>4</sup>

The creation of immigrant enterprises has accompanied the expansion of the immigrant population. Often marked by bilingual signage and bright colors, immigrant businesses, largely storefronts, are common features in the neighborhoods that serve as the hubs of the Hub. It seems remarkable now that only two decades ago a story in the *Boston Globe* observed that, "Boston's international population, unlike the Cubans of Miami, has yet to assert itself economically through the establishment of businesses."<sup>5</sup>

This study takes a close look at immigrant entrepreneurs in one Boston neighborhood—the Fields Corner section of Dorchester—and their connection to that area's community and economic development. The major goal of this work is to assess the ways these entrepreneurs contribute to the neighborhood they serve through economic revitalization and improvements in quality of life. This is a story that is being played out in other parts of Boston and, indeed, in cities throughout the United States.<sup>6</sup>

Identifying the myriad factors influencing neighborhood revitalization is complicated. Unraveling all of the potential threads is

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2. OFFICE OF IMMIGRATION STATISTICS, U.S. DEP'T OF HOMELAND SEC., 2004 YEARBOOK OF IMMIGRATION STATISTICS 42 (2006), available at <http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/yearbook/2004/Yearbook2004.pdf> (noting that Massachusetts admitted an average of 22,389 immigrants each year between 1995 and 2004).

3. ANDREW M. SUM ET AL., MASS. INST. FOR A NEW COMMONWEALTH & CTR. FOR LABOR MKT. STUDIES, THE CHANGING FACE OF MASSACHUSETTS 8 (2005), [http://www.massinc.org/fileadmin/researchreports/chagingface/changing\\_fact\\_report.pdf](http://www.massinc.org/fileadmin/researchreports/chagingface/changing_fact_report.pdf).

4. *Id.* at 9.

5. Kay Longcope, *Growing Influx of Refugees to Hub Make it an Impacted City*, BOSTON GLOBE, June 12, 1983, at 57.

6. See generally JONATHAN BOWLES & TARA COLTON, CTR. FOR AN URBAN FUTURE, A WORLD OF OPPORTUNITY (2007), available at [http://www.nycfuture.org/images\\_pdfs/pdfs/IE-final.pdf](http://www.nycfuture.org/images_pdfs/pdfs/IE-final.pdf).

beyond the scope of this study. Instead, this Article considers one major phenomenon—immigrant entrepreneurship. Much of the recent thinking on urban planning and revitalization has stressed the importance of improving the quality of life in neighborhoods, especially those that have undergone the shocks of economic restructuring and decline. In this context, traditional amenities—such as big highways or large shopping malls—and highly invasive means of revitalization—such as urban renewal—are unsuitable or less attractive for a host of reasons. Instead, as part of attracting new residents and resources to these neighborhoods, the nurturing of a diverse, small-business driven sector might be a key ingredient. Immigrant entrepreneurs are significant forces in developing this sector.

The accelerated demographic transition is largely driven by immigration, which is the backdrop for this analysis, and is only one of the many forces within which this narrative could be interpreted. For example, immigrant entrepreneurial dynamism has certainly been influenced in Boston by major endeavors such as the “Big Dig,” the cleanup of Boston harbor, development of the waterfront, and the remodeling and expansion of Logan Airport. The globalization of finance, trade, and labor activities also has important local consequences. While these factors are not fully explored in this analysis, their relevance is acknowledged.

Although the recent immigrant entrepreneurship phenomenon in Boston has not received much attention, the perception that immigrants are naturally entrepreneurial has been part of American folk wisdom for quite some time. There is a good deal of empirical accuracy in such a perception because self-employment is a very important route for the economic incorporation of immigrants. By a significant margin in every national Census since 1880, immigrants have been more likely to be self-employed than the native-born population.<sup>7</sup>

## I. PROFILE OF DORCHESTER AND FIELDS CORNER

Strong evidence of the overall trend of a growing immigrant presence in Boston can be gleaned from Dorchester’s changing demographics. In 1980 in North and South Dorchester, respectively, the Census reported the percentage of the total population

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7. *Immigrant Entrepreneurs*, RES. PERSP. ON MIGRATION (Int’l Migration Pol’y Program, D.C.; Urban Inst., D.C.), Jan.-Feb. 1997, at 1, available at <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/files/RPMVol1-No2.pdf>.

as 0% and 2% "Orientals," 58% and 75% whites, and 39% and 22% combined Blacks and Hispanics. Ten years later, whites had dropped to 56% of the total Dorchester population, African Americans were 22.7%, Latinos 14.3%, and Asian/Pacific Islanders (API) had increased to 6.3%. In 2000, APIs, at 13.2% of the total population, more than doubled their share of the population from ten years earlier. The white share of the population continued to decline to 35.6%. African Americans increased to 24.3%, while Latinos were proportionately steady at 14.2%.

The primary engine driving these demographic changes has been immigration. The Asian population in the city is nearly three-quarters immigrant, while the Latino population is 43% immigrant. From 1990 to 2000, the Dorchester foreign-born population grew from 23.5% to 32%.

Fields Corner is located in the central area of the large Dorchester section of Boston. It is organized around the intersection of two major arteries, Adams Street and Dorchester Avenue. The 35,000 residents in the ten census tracts around that intersection that roughly define Fields Corner are very diverse, with no dominant racial category. The largest racial category is African American, nearly 37% of the total population. Asian Americans account for fewer than 12% of the population in these census tracts. Over nine out of every ten Asians in Dorchester are Vietnamese. The age distribution is more heavily concentrated in the younger age cohorts compared to the rest of the city. The population is relatively stable. Over half the residents reside in the same house as they did five years ago.

According to a long-time resident and former president of the Fields Corner Civic Association, Fields Corner in the early 1960s was primarily a white, middle-class neighborhood of police officers, firefighters, and teachers. The neighborhood began changing significantly with court-ordered busing in the 1970s. A fair number of people from the traditional population moved out of Fields Corner, and some African Americans moved into the area. For a host of reasons, conditions in the area deteriorated and the police regarded the Fields Corner business section to be a high crime area.<sup>8</sup>

In the 1980s, Vietnamese immigrants, mostly refugees from the war in Southeast Asia, began arriving in the area. They began to

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8. James P. Brady, *Behind the Burning of Boston*, BOSTON GLOBE, Oct. 23, 1983, at 1; Robert B. Carr, *Police Shift Priority to Crime Prevention*, BOSTON GLOBE, Mar. 3, 1982, at 1; Joan Vennoch, *Arson Worst Since 1977*, BOSTON GLOBE, Aug. 5, 1982, at 1.

establish businesses in the latter part of the decade. The number of Vietnamese businesses grew steadily even through the recession period of the early 1990s, when newspaper accounts reported about thirty-five in the area.<sup>9</sup> By 1993, reporters referred to Fields Corner as an area “revitalized by Vietnamese entrepreneurs.”<sup>10</sup>

Not everyone welcomed the presence of the Vietnamese. The newcomers were subjected to various forms of harassment and vandalism.<sup>11</sup> Even some institutional officials harshly criticized the growth of the Vietnamese population in the neighborhood. In the most well known incident, captured on video, a City Council member denounced the transformation of the neighborhood, snarling, “I thought I was in Saigon, for Chrissakes. For Chrissakes, it makes you sick . . . .”<sup>12</sup>

Councilor O’Neil’s comments proved to be an important watershed for both the Vietnamese and their neighbors. For the first time, Vietnamese mounted a concerted response denouncing O’Neil’s characterization of their presence and demanding an apology. For many in the larger community, steps were taken to build acceptance of the Vietnamese and to treat Vietnamese residents and businesses as integral parts of the neighborhood.

Fields Corner is the area’s largest business district. A knowledgeable informant estimates that of the 225 businesses in the area, 126 are Vietnamese-owned. The Vietnamese entrepreneurs play diverse roles in the neighborhood economy. One-third of the entrepreneurs are in retail trade with most involving food. More than half of all businesses are services, most of them professionals—lawyers, medical doctors, architects—followed by personal beauty and automotive. Ten percent are financial, insurance, and real estate businesses:

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9. Philip Bennett, *Vietnamese Make Dollars of Dreams in Fields Corner: Dorchester Community Aids, Inspires Their High Hopes*, BOSTON GLOBE, Sept. 14, 1991, at 25.

10. Stephen Kurkjian & Philip Bennett, *Vietnamese Business Owners Battle Arson, Other Crimes in Fields Corner*, BOSTON GLOBE, May 1, 1993, at 17.

11. Peter Mancusi, *Fighting to Make It in a New World: Vietnamese Refugee’s Dorchester Store is Part of a Dream to Succeed in America*, BOSTON GLOBE, Mar. 29, 1982, at 13.

12. Brian McGrory, *Tape Shows O’Neil Disparaging Asians*, BOSTON GLOBE, June 10, 1992, at 26.

NCAIS (No. American Industry Classification System) Category	Number of Businesses
Fire	13
Food Retail Trade (i.e., Eating & Drinking Places, Groceries, Bakeries)	20
Other Retail Trade	22
Personal Services	15
Professional Services	23
Other Services	33
Wholesale Trade	0
Total	126

## II. APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

Growth in many neighborhoods is built upon the foundation of an urban ethnic enclave. The formation of this enclave emphasizes that an immigrant group can organize itself to influence its spatial surroundings by forming a cluster of businesses whose owners and employees are co-ethnics. In the formation of the ethnic enclave, an initial beachhead of a handful of small businesses serving the local immigrant customer base can expand and consolidate geographically; developing networks, supply chains, channels of capital circulation, labor markets, and banking and financial institutions that could even have a transnational reach. This consolidation enhances sustainability. In the ethnic enclave, immigrant business activity can perhaps generate political empowerment and control of a certain area.

Although elements of this ethnic-enclave dynamic are clearly evident among the Vietnamese in Fields Corner, the full realization of the process from entry to consolidation to control is far from being fully achieved. This process, however, does provide a framework for contemplating the nature of growth and revitalization in this neighborhood.

This study relies largely on an approach that is centered on the perspective of immigrant entrepreneurs themselves. Personal interviews with immigrant business owners are used as the principal medium to assess their contribution. Unlike many studies of immigrants, therefore, this examination lets the words of selected immigrants serve as essential parts of the conversation. In part, the method is the message.

The Fields Corner Vietnamese immigrant businesses sampled were storefront businesses that had been in operation for three or

more years. Twelve interviews were conducted in Vietnamese with immigrant business owners. The businesses were randomly chosen from a supplemented list compiled by Viet-AID.<sup>13</sup> If, after three attempts, interviews could not be completed with businesses initially selected, additional subjects were randomly chosen. All of the interviews were conducted in person and anonymously. With the interviewee's consent, which was typically given, the session was recorded and an English-language transcription prepared.

The twelve business owners interviewed provide a variety of products and services. Three are in financial services and real estate, two in legal and business, and seven in the retail trade—restaurant, electronics store, gift shop, grocery, bookstore, pharmacy, signs. Of the seven owners in the retail trade, one also operated as a wholesaler.<sup>14</sup> For the most part, the retail businesses are small and mid-sized with a dozen or fewer employees. The types of businesses in the sample include: insurance agency; mortgage brokerage; real estate management and development; law practice; sign company; restaurant or fast food; bookstore; electronics store; gift shop; grocery; pharmacy.

While the business owners commented on their perceptions regarding the immediate impact of their business activity on the quality of life in the areas in which they were located, their narratives also provide insights and data on startup decisions, neighborhood responses, basic business operations, relations with other businesses and associations, use of public services and programs, and future plans.

In addition, three key informants who had regular interactions with immigrant businesses and who are knowledgeable observers of the neighborhood and businesses that operate in it were interviewed. These informants were from the Boston Police Department's Community Relations unit, the Fields Corner Civic Association, and Fields Corner Main Streets, a business development agency.

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13. Viet-AID is the Vietnamese American Initiative for Development. It is a "community development corporation" whose "mission is to build a strong Vietnamese community and a vibrant Fields Corner." For more information on Viet-AID, see VietAID, <http://www.vietaid.org>.

14. This respondent was identified as a retailer in the selection process. In the course of the interview process, it was found that he had additional business activities and operated primarily as a wholesaler.

### III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

#### A. *Neighborhood Relationships*

The growing Vietnamese population in Fields Corner was most often cited as a factor in the decisions to locate there. Initial low rents and the availability of public transportation were additional factors that the respondents considered in their location decision making. Most of the businesses were newly started by the Vietnamese owners. In one case, the Vietnamese owner purchased an existing establishment.

Despite some of the unwelcoming comments voiced by politicians and others about the emerging Vietnamese population, there were few complaints from the Vietnamese owners about how they were received in the neighborhood. Only one owner, who was among the first to move into the area, cited any hostility.

The immigrant business owners interviewed reported limited participation in the neighborhood. Key informants acknowledged that it was very difficult to bring immigrant businesses into the few established associations. Those who belonged to an association were the five who are part of the Vietnamese Merchants Association and two with the Dorchester Board of Trade. Most business owners typically indicated that a lack of time, exacerbated by the long hours that their businesses are open, made it difficult for them to engage in these activities. Similarly, their contact with other business owners was limited and did not extend to socializing, although some made efforts to meet others. Half of the business owners expressed no complaints about other businesses in the neighborhood. Only two cited what they regarded as unethical competition or jealousy.

Beyond business associations, one business owner reported belonging to a neighborhood agency board, and another belonged to the Fields Corner Community Development Corporation (CDC) board. About half of the owners donated to various events and organizations.

The Vietnamese-American business owners exemplify commitment to the neighborhood through their long-standing operations, the creation of their own ethnic institutions, a genuine, albeit limited, role in established institutions, and contributions to social services and other programs. The tone of their responses revealed a sense of ownership of the area. This sense might be attributable to the fact that the Vietnamese ventured into a neighborhood in decline and have established a more developed ethnic enclave.

The development of an ethnic-based business association—the Vietnamese Merchants Association—sheds insight on the disconnection between existing institutional structures and immigrant business owners. It points to the need for change in traditional institutional structures and is not due to immigrants' lack of understanding about the role of these institutions. One possible avenue for integrating immigrant business owners into the community might be through developing relationships between traditional and ethnic business associations.

Although neighborhood relationships were characterized as good by the interviewees, there is some evidence to indicate that the quality might be overstated with respect to other Vietnamese businesses. Indeed, one business owner who said the neighborhood was supportive actually faced opposition from residents in the neighborhood approval process.

### B. *Business Operations*

The businesses have a broad range of hours of operation. For those in professional services and financial, insurance, and real estate categories, they range from forty to sixty hours a week. For businesses engaged in retail trade, they were typically open seven days a week with hours ranging from forty-eight to ninety-eight hours per week.<sup>15</sup>

Having been open for more than ten years on average, the businesses in the sample are fairly well established, especially for immigrant-owned enterprises. The owners started their businesses about a decade after arriving in the United States. Many of the businesses are small, family-run operations. Most businesses have only a few employees, typically family members, some of whom live in the neighborhood. Some individual businesses did emerge, usually financial and professional services. Most of the owners live outside of the neighborhood.

The type of business entered into reflected a number of aspirations. Fields Corner business owners began their businesses largely as a means of survival and employment for their families and to serve the community. The businesses chosen did not always reflect the formal training of their owners.

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15. The average number of years the owner had been in the United States before starting the business was 10.4. The average number of years of operation was 11.4. The median hours of operation was sixty, and the median number of employees was two.

Most of the Fields Corner businesses depend on the Vietnamese enclave customer base. The existence of this base was the primary factor influencing the owners' decisions to locate their businesses in Fields Corner. All of them added that the availability of low rent initially was another factor. Of the twelve businesses, nine said that their customers are primarily or exclusively Vietnamese. Two, however, stated that their clientele are exclusively "American," which for immigrants often means non-immigrant.

While initially focused on the Vietnamese population, the businesses have diversified their customer base over time. As neighborhood residents of all backgrounds have become more familiar with the businesses, they have patronized the Vietnamese establishments. A restaurant owner said that his first customers were exclusively Asian, but non-Asian customers have slowly increased to account for one-fifth of the customers. A Vietnamese pharmacist explained:

For most Vietnamese, because of language and cultural barriers, Vietnamese, especially for medicine and pharmacy, often come to us because we take time to explain to them what and how they should take their medicine. Because of the language barrier, they don't take the right medicines or follow the correct instructions. It might not be effective or even harmful. Because of the language barrier, they can't go to an American pharmacy. That's why they come to us. In addition, many doctors working in the hospitals in and around here, whenever they see Vietnamese patients and can't speak to them, they call me up, and I help provide interpretation.

The Vietnamese business owners in Fields Corner took a long time to open their establishments. The conditions under which they arrived in the United States and Boston help to provide an explanation. Since Vietnamese arrived overwhelmingly as refugees, their first years in the United States and their future intentions were probably muddled. They typically had to spend a long and difficult period adjusting to the new environment.

The Vietnamese enclave and family loom large in the remarks of the Fields Corner business owners. The owners always considered the family and the larger Vietnamese community when deciding to open a business.

The respondents, although modest in their assertions, do believe that they have brought a number of benefits to the Fields Cor-

ner neighborhood. Most often mentioned is the revival of an area once regarded as dangerous and underutilized. Their businesses fulfill the needs of many residents by expanding beyond their initial Vietnamese base into different sectors. The area's present reputation as a distinct enclave attracts customers to the neighborhood, primarily from the greater Vietnamese American community or those interested in a distinct cuisine. This, in turn, increases commercial activity of all kinds in the area.

The present operations of the immigrant businesses impose a low-burden upon existing public services. Only in the last few years have they made some limited requests such as for Vietnamese-speaking liaisons with critical agencies and departments.<sup>16</sup>

### C. *Public Services and Programs*

The immigrant business owners reported that for their business startup and continuing operations they relied on their own efforts and their ethnic social networks; they seldom relied on public services and programs. None of the Fields Corner businesses indicated participation in an economic development program or small business improvement program. In general, the business owners perceived support as something that was unnecessary. However, there was some indication that they would consider using certain programs under the right circumstances.

Although an independent streak seemed to lie behind most of the responses, there are indications that a lack of access as well as a lack of desire explains their attitudes toward public services. For example, some owners cited limited awareness and overly complex paperwork and documentation as barriers to using business support and credit programs. One typical response was:

I did not receive any help. However, I believe that we must believe in ourselves. We must help ourselves first before God helps you. For so many years, we depended on ourselves. We did it ourselves. We did not receive any support. Again, we must help ourselves before we ask others to help.

[Some challenges were] not enough start up capital, not enough money. When we first opened, we did not have enough money, we could only buy used equipment. The used equipment broke down often and did not last. It costs more to fix and to

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16. Philip Bennett, *A Bridge over the Cultural Divide: Outraged over Killing, Vietnamese Community Aids Police*, BOSTON GLOBE, Nov. 26, 1993, at 41.

maintain them than to buy new equipment. But we did not have enough money, and we didn't know better.

In response to a question about why he didn't borrow, the business owner said: "There are two reasons for not borrowing. First, it is difficult to borrow. Second, Asians don't want to borrow. You borrow only to buy heavy and expensive equipment like trucks[,] etc."

One-third of the owners indicated that they had no help in starting their businesses. Those owners who admitted some needs most often cited the desire for available credit. One owner stated that he needed to have more knowledge about his business, and another reported difficulty in finding bilingual employees. There were few complaints about the degree of support received from the neighborhood and the way they had been treated by locals.

Several owners were dissatisfied with public services. They mentioned street cleaning, safety, parking, and traffic, in that order, as the most difficult problems in the area. One-third cited no problems at all. The general impression of the owners was that the area has become dramatically more active and revitalized over the years.

In Fields Corner there are some vibrant business-related entities that Vietnamese businesses can turn to. Most notable of these is the decade old Viet-AID. On the other hand, local merchant associations are not very active, and the Fields Corner Main Streets, a local commercial district support program, has only recently been revived.

While the immigrant business owners generally voiced their self-reliance, there is some reason to treat their assessment cautiously. For example, Viet-AID had assisted one of the respondents in applying for a façade improvement grant. The respondent abandoned the application after he became frustrated with the process. With the proper approaches and outreach, business assistance could be provided to owners who could really use it.

#### D. *Future Plans and Expectations*

Expansion is clearly on the agenda for most of the Vietnamese entrepreneurs. Three-quarters of the business owners intend to expand their businesses either by adding services or additional businesses. Some had already done so. One very enterprising individual owns a bookstore, a flower shop, and a food distribution business. Another has bought many properties in the area and now wants to move into commercial real estate.

Almost all of the owners credited their fellow Vietnamese merchants for helping to transform an abandoned, declining area into a thriving one, creating economic value and assets. They also saw themselves providing important services and products, filling gaps in the neighborhood, and not just for Vietnamese clientele. A typical assessment of their role was: "Of course [my business] makes this neighborhood better. It makes this neighborhood more beautiful. The community ignored this neighborhood before. People did not want to move here because it was desolate and unsafe. Now, people want to come here."<sup>17</sup>

In the process of upgrading the area, the business owners expected support from the city in first addressing matters of safety and police presence. Second, they were concerned about street cleaning and the appearance of the neighborhood. Two said that more business assistance programs would be helpful. One owner suggested closing down fraudulent businesses, and another suggested creating a powerful business association.

Most of the owners appeared to be doing sufficiently well enough to think realistically about expanding their businesses. Their plans for expansion are founded on successful business operations and not just wishful thinking. Plans primarily involve extending the present businesses; one or two mentioned adding additional retail operations.

Some of the owners view their businesses as a legacy for their children. The more these plans are fulfilled, the longer the neighborhood benefits.

#### E. *Neighborhood Impact*

The intrepid Vietnamese entrepreneurs who pioneered starting businesses in Fields Corner took more than their share of risks. Their decisions have paid off for the neighborhood. As in other areas of Boston, the growing concentration of immigrant enterprises has been a significant factor in first starting and then sustaining businesses.

The major objective of this study was to assess the impact that immigrant entrepreneurs have on an urban neighborhood. The immigrant entrepreneurs we encountered contribute to the economy and quality of life of Fields Corner in a number of ways; for example, reviving commerce and investment in areas that had declined;

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17. *Id.*

providing needed products and services; addressing the particular needs of a distinctive ethnic niche; expanding beyond that niche; incubating new businesses; attracting new customers; providing some employment opportunities; improving the physical quality and appearance of the buildings in which they operate and surrounding areas; enhancing public safety; and contributing to a broader sense of community and "ownership."

### CONCLUSION

In summary, the impact of immigrant entrepreneurs is a positive one. They provide needed goods and services to existing residents and attract new customers, adding to the economic life of the neighborhood. They enhance the physical well-being and appearance of the areas in which they operate and help make them safer. Although many of the businesses are small operations, they provide some jobs, and, as the size and number of businesses grow, those opportunities will increase. Many of the entrepreneurs do not sit still. They look to expand, branch out, and diversify. All in all, the immigrant businesses have proven to be engines of change that contribute to a feeling of stability.

The interviews also elicited information on areas other than the impact of immigrant businesses on neighborhood revitalization. The narratives provide insights into decisions about starting the businesses, business operations, neighborhood relationships, and the use of various programs and services. The business owners also reflected on their future plans and expectations.

In their rich narratives, the business owners clearly show that traversing the difficult road to business ownership and staying the course require a complex combination of hard work, savvy, creativity, and an ability to deal with life's twists and turns. Indeed, for many, talk about business and personal life is intermingled. The effective differentiation between life and the business enterprise takes some time to happen. Remarkable creativity and adaptability are common traits in these entrepreneurs. These owners tackled enterprises that did not always reflect their formal training or prior experience.

Although a popular allegation leveled at immigrants is that they place an undue strain on public services and programs, the evidence reported in this case suggests that when it comes to assistance with their businesses, immigrant owners seldom partake. Cultural and language barriers, a strong sense of self reliance, and other fac-

tors help account for this and the low levels of participation in mainstream business associations. When there is low use of public services, the perennial question arises: is it due to a lack of need or a lack of accessibility?

Many of these business owners project an image of strength and confidence. Their words and actions speak convincingly of self reliance, “going it alone,” and of “owning” the neighborhood. Indeed, as the data here attest, they have built successful businesses that have helped to revitalize communities. One should be cautious, however, in believing fully these declarations of independence. Less frequently, but in several instances, immigrant owners reveal their uncertainty. Some owners, for example, wonder whether their own accomplishments may come back to haunt them in higher rents and larger, big-box competitors moving into what are now newly desirable locales. What they have helped to make desirable may no longer be affordable for them.

The owners also feel vulnerable to the machinations of institutions much larger than themselves, such as the Boston Redevelopment Authority in Dorchester that can in a heartbeat alter their livelihoods. The challenges for those who care about these businesses and the people they serve are to help the businesses ride the wave when those institutions and other powerful forces create opportunities, and to shelter them as much as possible from negative consequences.

In the end, among these entrepreneurs, there is a special determination and fortitude. One is left with wonder and appreciation for what they have achieved for themselves and for their communities. Their example, just as much as their impact on the economic and physical well-being of the neighborhood they serve, might be their most vital asset.