

New Orleans CityBusiness



December 9, 2007 16:18 MST

D.C.-area company lures foreign investors to New Orleans by AP

ROCKVILLE, Md. - A retired Air Force colonel wearing rainbow Mardi Gras beads delivered an unusual pitch to wealthy Chinese business owners at a conference recently: Invest in the reconstruction of New Orleans and get a green card.

Timothy Milbrath is co-founder of NobleOutReach, a Gaithersburg-based fund built around an unusual piece of immigration law — the EB-5 visa program.

The program reserves several thousand visas a year for foreign investors who put at least \$500,000 into one of 17 projects around the country designed to stimulate troubled local economies. Projects include a dairy-farming business in South Dakota and an ethanol production plant in Texas. Investors receive whatever dividends result from the projects, as well as green cards for themselves and their immediate families.

In the case of NobleOutReach, the money raised from immigrant investors will be used to develop office buildings, hotels, restaurants and medical clinics in New Orleans. So far, the fund has attracted about 50 investors from South Korea, China, Britain and the Middle East, according to the company.

"So many of our immigration policies don't make sense, but this does," Milbrath said.

At the Rockville conference, local business leader Duc Duong was among many who stopped by NobleOutReach's booth to hear about details of the visa program.

"There are many, many people in China with wealth. The problem is that they don't have the quality of life that they want in China, particularly with education for their children," said Duong, who serves as the local chairman of an Asian American technology business group known as Monte Jade.

The EB-5 pilot visa program grew from a program that critics have called the "million-dollar visa," because it grants permanent residency in return for \$1 million in direct business investments. The program was restructured in 2002. As part of the changes, would-be immigrants can put in as little as \$500,000 if the investment is made in a recognized regional project.

Morrie Berez, chief of the EB-5 program at the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, said applicants undergo exhaustive background checks. Investors initially receive two-year residency permits while authorities monitor their investments.