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U.S. investor energizes Burnaby's Tekion

By Michael McQuillan

It's now easier for foreign entrepreneurs to immigrate to B.C. and one Burnaby company is grateful that door has been opened.

Burnaby's Tekion (www.tekion.com) is currently developing a micro fuel cell that will be used to power cell phones, laptop computers and other mobile devices. Formed in 2003, the company's largest investor is American Allen Born, who hopes to soon have his Canadian citizenship. Once he does, Born will be able to spend more time in Canada and expand the high-tech company.

The company has a fast-tracked plan to have its product on the market by 2007.

Born is part of the provincial nominee program (PNP), a B.C. government program that speeds up the applications of immigrant entrepreneurs and skilled workers wanting to be Canadian citizens and to do business in the province.

On Tuesday the federal and provincial governments improved the PNP by signing a memorandum of understanding. Under the agreement, Citizenship and Immigration Canada will identify people and then steer them towards the PNP. The agreement is a pilot project that other provinces could follow in the future.

At a press conference held at Tekion Tuesday, Federal Immigration Minister Monte Solberg described it as a way make immigration work for all Canadians. B.C. Economic Development Minister Colin Hansen said it is vital to the province as it continues to gain economic strength and the need for entrepreneurs and skilled workers becomes greater.

Without the program and agreement, Tekion may not have arrived at the point they're at now. Born has not only provided investment and expertise, he's also had access to a key piece of technology vital to their fuel cell. The Formira fuel cell technology that will be used in their long-lasting batteries was developed at the University of Illinois. Tekion was able to receive access to that technology because Born is a U.S. citizen and through the company's creation of an American division.

Born and others involved with Tekion chose to set up in Burnaby because it's considered to be the "fuel cell capital of the world."

Neil Huff, president of the company, said there are 15 to 20 fuel cell companies in the Lower Mainland, mostly in Burnaby and Vancouver. Huff, a former Ballard executive, said that Burnaby company has spawned many others. "In our company, probably 60 per cent [of staff] are ex-Ballard," said Huff.

Amongst the cluster of fuel cell companies, most have their own areas of expertise and are working on different products. Companies aren't openly competitive, but instead "feed off each other," said Huff.

Tekion now employs 75 people with 65 at their Burnaby office.

