



MEMORANDUM

TO: Laurel Lunt Prussing, Mayor
FROM: Elizabeth Davis
DATE: February 15, 2008
SUBJECT: Sister Cities

Summary

Alderman Dennis Roberts has proposed establishing a sister city relationship with Zomba, Malawi, Africa. He has been in contact with the Zomba Municipal Assembly, and several of Zomba's leaders have expressed a mutual desire to establish a sister city relationship with Urbana as well.

The most structured way to develop and sustain such a relationship is through an existing organization, *Sister Cities International*. This not-for-profit organization oversees the *U.S. Sister Cities* program, which traces its roots to 1956 when President Dwight D. Eisenhower proposed a People-to-People citizen diplomacy initiative. Originally a part of the National League of Cities, SCI became a separate, non-profit corporation in 1967 due to the tremendous growth and popularity of the U.S. program. The program offers grants, publications, coordinators to assist in developing the sister city relationship, conferences, awards, and other benefits. Costs for the program are prorated based on population and are discussed further in this memo.

Zomba, Malawi, Africa

Zomba, located in the southern region of Malawi, is one of the country's four urban centers with an estimated 107,000 residents. It is home to Chancellor College, the largest college in the University of Malawi system, as well as the Kamuzu College of Nursing and the College of Medicine. Approximately half of the university's 6,257 students attend school in Zomba.¹

The country of Malawi is slightly smaller than the state of Pennsylvania but is one of the most densely populated countries in the world with 13,603,181 residents. The country's economy is primarily agricultural-based, with approximately 90 percent of the nation's labor force employed in agriculture and primary exports being tobacco, peanuts, tea, sugar and cotton. Malawi faces a number of issues, including deforestation, water pollution and significant health issues. The infant mortality rate in Malawi is the 15th highest in the world and the average life expectancy of a Malawi resident is 42.9 years, which is the 10th lowest in the world. Infectious diseases, such as malaria, typhoid fever, and HIV contribute significantly to the low life expectancy rate; the HIV rate in Malawi is the 8th highest in the world.²

¹ "Historical Background." University of Malawi, <http://www.unima.mw/background.htm>.

² "Malawi." *The World Factbook*. U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mi.html#Intro>.

Typical Framework

The following is the common structure that many U.S. municipalities have adopted for their sister city program:

- *Mayor as Honorary Chair.* The mayor's level of interest in the program will vary from city to city and mayor to mayor in the United States
- *Staff person at city hall or the "Liaison to the Sister Cities Committee."* The level of administrative and programmatic involvement by this person also varies from city to city. This position can be found in a wide variety of departments, such as the mayor's office, the economic development department, international relations office, the city manager's office, the parks and recreation department or the cultural affairs department.
- *Executive Director or Coordinator of the non-profit organization "Sister Cities."* Some cities have a full-time or part-time *non-city hall staff* person to administer part of the work of the program. This person works on behalf of the legally incorporated Sister Cities non-profit organization (on behalf of the city government and the various volunteer committees).
- *President and Board Members.* Many cities have an overall president of their sister cities program. These people are volunteers who rise up to these leadership positions inside the volunteer sister city program.
- *Committee Chairs and Individual Volunteers.* Many/most U.S. cities have chairpersons for each of their sister city committees. Almost all U.S. sister city programs are heavily dependent on volunteers to support their program.

Best Practices

Developing and nurturing a sister city will require active participation and engagement on the part of various stakeholders, including but not limited to the Mayor, Council, Urbana's business sector, service organization and residents. The following are recommendations from SCI on ensuring a successful sister city program:

1. *Solid support and involvement from:*

- City Hall – the mayor as honorary chair; a staff person designated at city hall to support the sister city program; direct involvement of various city departments in municipal, economic development, technical, public safety or other exchanges; various direct and in-direct (in-kind) support for sister city activities, such as assistance with administrative costs and receptions.
- Business sector, with opportunities for corporations and small businesses, as well as individual business people, to contribute their time and/or financial or in-kind support. The local Chamber of Commerce and other key organizations should also be actively involved in the sister city program.

2. *A broad-based sister city committee:* The best long-term indicator of success for a sister city program (since elected officials come and go) is a broad-based sister city committee, made up of many individual citizens who are enthusiastic supporters of the sister city program. Every effort should be made to recruit people from various professions, a youth delegate, people from different ethnic and religious groups, both women and men, and people with disabilities. Citizen volunteers in the United States and abroad contribute an enormous "cost share" to the local program through their time and various out-of-pocket expenses, including annual individual and family membership fees, travel expenses abroad and hosting expenses at home.

3. *Forming alliances:* To maximize limited resources and the potential outreach and impact of the sister city program in the community, every effort should be made to form additional alliances within the overall sister city program, such as sister schools or twinned Rotary and Lion's clubs.

4. *Excellent communication links*: It is essential to have excellent communication links, including reliable phone, fax and Internet communications, with back up fax and phone numbers when necessary. Fax machines should be kept on at night. Communication from a sister city should be responded to immediately to maintain good relations. Even if a decision concerning a proposal has not been reached, a quick reply saying, for example, “Thank you for your fax – we will respond to you after our meeting next month,” should be sent promptly, acknowledging receipt of an important proposal or letter.

5. *Sensitivity to cultural differences*: Sister City projects should be reciprocal and jointly planned, executed and evaluated. Also, there needs to be time built into actual exchanges for cross-culturally sensitive feedback to avoid serious “culture bumps.” Formal time for cross-cultural discussion, to learn about more complex layers of culture, such as the changing role of women in society, child rearing methods or how decisions are actually made in local government or businesses, should be built into all exchanges and projects.

6. *Clear objectives*: To maintain excellent, two-way communication and to keep the program active, it is important that cities meet at least every other year to develop a *Memorandum of Understanding* about what they plan for their partnership, including frank discussions about areas of interest, realities of budgets and other important details in carrying out proposed exchanges or projects.

7. *There are a variety of low-cost exchanges that should occur every year, even if it is not possible to have a physical exchange of people. Some suggestions are:*

- An annual “state of the city” letter between the two mayors
- Exchanges of the city annual reports and city plans by officials at city hall
- Exchanges of children’s artwork, letters or sister school programs through the Internet
- Periodic exchanges of interesting newspaper articles that show how society, technology, the environment, etc. are changing in your city
- Cultural festivals, movies or speeches that celebrate the culture of the sister city (foreign students or business people from the nation of the sister city can be guest speakers).

8. *Regular exchanges*: It is essential to agree on regular, sustainable exchanges of people that will take place every year or, at the very least, every other year. There are many possibilities for this, including teacher and student exchanges, municipal internships for city officials in key fields, young business leader internships sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce, or participation at the largest annual festival in the sister city.

9. *Willingness to take risks*: All relationships, like friendships, need to take a risk once in a while with a larger or more ambitious project, to stay fresh and to achieve their full potential. Such projects require a high degree of planning, fund raising, and time and effort, but they also can be a very positive, life-transforming experience for all involved.

Costs

Dues for the program for U.S. cities are prorated based on population. The dues for Urbana would be \$510 per year, while Zomba’s dues would be \$140 since they are considered “Global Members.” However, Urbana’s membership dues for the first year of membership will be reduced by 50% because we have an existing relationship with Zomba.