

Sister City Relations

Elements of sustained, successful partnerships

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This outline is of elements of success of active, long-lived sister city relationships. The observations are based on the experiences of many persons who have been involved and participated in these partnerships, over more than three decades. The “elements of success” are refined from talks and experiences. There is emphasis on the experiences of cities such as City of Camas’ sister cities. These are: Hoshoe, Japan (since early 1980s); Taki, Japan (c. 1994); Morawica, Krapkowice and Zabierzow (with beginnings in 1998, formalized in 2004). The multi-party partnership agreement with European cities includes: Lipova-Lazne, Czechia; Wissen and Neugersdorf, Germany, Royhatyn, Ukraine.

City of Camas partners, in turn also have other formalized relations, with a variety of other European cities in Spain, France, England, Slovakia, Italy, and Poland. If the “core relations” for Camas are “Sister Cities”, perhaps these numerous other relations are “cousins”.

The remarks on “Successful, sustained partnerships” also benefit from rather wide travels and discussions with local leaders in America, Poland, Czechia, Germany, and Japan. The thoughts and reflections of many are integrated into this summary paper, and I appreciate the thoughts and experiences which others have shared with me on this subject.

Elements of Success: These are not necessarily in order of importance; and indeed, the elements seem to have different “weights” in the experiences of varied communities.

1. **Common interests and circumstances:** These range across a wide spectrum. Cities of somewhat the same population seem good matches. Shared economic interests support this. Examples: cities with wine/tourism focus, or similar technology interests. Cities facing growth and economic diversification challenges share that subject. Another example: Cities which treasure and preserve their special environmental/scenic values. An obvious shared interest would be populations which have linguistic and cultural similarities or identities. The list goes on: University cities; Communities with the same name; towns with airports or next to national parks.
2. **Support and interest by Local Government Leaders.** This is a key element. Mayors and similar leaders need not do “the work” of the partnerships; however their support is fundamental. It authorizes and legitimizes the efforts. In American circumstances, when the schools are an institution separate from the City, the support of the School authorities is

critically important. This especially means the Superintendent, School Board, and then, when used, a School Activities Coordinator.

3. For sustainability of the relationships, **a variety and depth of activities** is very helpful. In Camas' relations with the three Polish Cities, there are varied *activities which reach deep into the communities*. Adult exchanges, Mid-School exchanges (with home stays), Volunteer Teachers and Youth Assistants engagement in the annual English Language Summer Camp in Poland; Art and cultural exchanges; mutual visits of local government and other professionals to the area and counterpart professional organizations, church involvement, these and others mutually re-inforce and deepen the community roots and support of the collaborations. Along the way, friendships develop and these add to the strength and vitality of the sister city partnerships. In the words of a Polish City official: *"It is also about the friendships"*.
4. **Co-coordinators** who have a special role, skills and enthusiasm. For successful communities, this person becomes the key point of contact for organizing, coordinating and communicating. In experiences with Polish and Japanese cities, the successful coordinator is a city employee or closely related to the city and the private association. In Camas' case, the school district has designated an enthusiastic, skillful School leader as coordinator of the school based activities. This is done in communication with the City/Sister City leader of the efforts. It works very well! The coordinators need to have excellent English language skills and communication skills overall. Coordination takes time, and that means the person needs to "mobilize the time", with the support of employer/and or family.
In the Camas—Polish partnerships, we have had the benefit of excellent, skilled, well positioned, long term coordinators; and ***the activities flourish!*** Thank you: Anna Kowalska, Jolanta Mysluk, and Malgrozata Tomczyk, and Agnieszka Migon of the partner professional organization. Another illustration of this success is in the long-time successful relations between Morawica and Herbolzheim, Germany. A dedicated Herbolzheim school leader has sustained, organized, supported and "driven" the collaboration for his town. A contrast which points to the importance of coordinators is from Japan. For local reasons in Japanese Cities, the coordinators have changed rather frequently, and have ranged in enthusiasm and skills. The program has seen ebbs and flows of activity related to these changes.
5. **Citizens Group.** The existence and vitality of a citizens association, often a "non-governmental organization or NGO" is another element of success. In the USA, such citizen organizations can achieve important fund-raising, and citizen engagement, to enhance the City and Schools' efforts. Experience shows that such a citizens association (Camas Sister City Organization, a non-profit recognized corporation and association) is valuable and flexible. The membership need not be huge; however it seems that an active "core group" is necessary... Even in times (like COVID) of less activity, the continued existence of a recognized association is valuable.
6. **Funding.** Writing only about the US side, funding of the efforts appears not to be a key issue for success. For exchanges to our community, most costs are borne by the "home stay" hosts, and other modest amounts of hosting, travel and support costs seem able to be raised. Such "out of pocket costs" for the Camas Sister City Organization for a typical activity (delegation visit, mid-school group visit, Summer English Language Camp support as examples) is historically under \$5, 000. For actual activities, a variety of help just seems to come forward. Examples:

School support for teachers; hosted meals, private provided transportation; discounted event tickets, etc. In the European/Polish context, official City support for activities appears to be robust and customary. In Camas/Washington State, with a different framework for public finance, City funding is very narrowly limited. As to other, private and needed funding, I like to say: *"If the ideas are strong enough, the money will be there."*

Challenges: the continuity and vitality of sister city relationships can be fragile. To be fostered with care, patience and persistence. Here are two challenging circumstances which are natural:

Change of leadership. It is natural that over time, leaders will change. Especially elected leadership and top administrative staff can change. With different dynamics, the same occurs with leaders of non-profit citizen associations, and school staff. Typically, Sister City is not a "controversy" stirring opposition. On the Polish/European side, it appears that Sister or Partner City arrangements are widely supported and often seen as a mark of success.

Controversy or opposition does not seem like an obstacle. The more likely danger is "disinterest". As new leaders deal with all the matters which press upon their time and energy, international partnerships can seem "far away" and low priority. As examples of changes in Camas, the Mayor, City Administrator, and School Superintendant positions have all changed, several times in the past 20 years. When these transitions occur, there can be a profound decline in interest and commitment to the partnerships. In the Polish sister cities, Zabierzow has changed Mayors three times since the initiation of the partnership, and in Krapkowice there has been one turn-over of Mayors. Morawica's exemplary Mayor Buras initiated the partnerships and has been the dynamic and recognized leader of international cooperation. In each of the three Polish communities, and Camas, change in leadership has not diminished the cooperation. For more than a decade, each of the Polish Cities is lead by a re-elected Mayor. Thank you, steady Mayors Buras, Burtan and Kasiura!

Knowing that change will naturally happen, it is well to "cultivate" and consciously include "the next generation of leadership" in the partnership. A positive example of this in Camas the increasing role of Stephen Baranowski, School Activities Coordinator.

Flexibility and Adaptation: For successful collaborations, there is the challenge of adapting and innovating. There is a natural tendency to only repeat what works. "If it isn't broken, don't fix it" goes the folk expression. To remain vital, innovation, openness and flexibility seem valuable. Listening to "new ideas" and suggestions---especially from the partners is important. A current example of flexibility is in relief for Ukrainian refugees sheltered and supported by our Polish partners. This, like the invasion, came upon everyone fast. The Polish partners acted swiftly and welcomed literally hundreds of refugees. On the US side, Camas City, Sister City Organization, Professional partners in the Washington City Management Association (WCMA) responded quickly, with flexibility and teamwork. We quickly raised \$15,000 and distributed it to our Polish partners for direct assistance to displaced persons sheltering in the three Sister Cities. This is deeply appreciated.

Another example of flexibility and innovation is the professional relationship and cooperation between the Washington City Management Association and the Polish Foundation for the Support of Local Democracy and the Forum of Sekretarze. This evolved from contacts, proposals, and innovation between local government professionals. Such cooperation is illustrated this year by the “Leaders Tour 2023”; an eleven day visit by thirteen esteemed leaders from the partners to Washington State. By all accounts, it was a major success. The experiences touched “hearts and minds” of the delegates, and the hosts. Further cooperation, this year is underway. The new official and lively partnership between Washougal, Washington and Zielonki, Poland illustrates innovation and mutual interests. Adaptability strengthens the Sister City Relations, and is another avenue for innovation. It is important to “listen to the partners”.

Listening resulted in lasting art and written contributions to the cooperation. A book entitled “Silesian Stories” has been printed and published by Krapkowice, and it includes high quality art—watercolor paintings. This legacy contribution to the Sister Cities partnership deepens and broadens the relations, and largely results from listening to the partners. A second work—on “model cities”—is possible. It is another cooperative initiative, in early development. Visionary Mayor Marian Buras proposed this project; and the partners are starting with this endeavor.

Summary: This is a summary of impressions and observations about fostering long-term successful international Sister City partnerships. My hope is that this summary paper will assist other communities in their pursuit of international cooperation. It is a “people to people”, “community to community” initiative—a modest contribution international understanding and friendship.

Sincerely,

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