



## **CITY OF MENIFEE**

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SUBJECT: Sister City Program and Membership

MEETING DATE: March 15, 2023

TO: Mayor and City Council

PREPARED BY: Gina Gonzalez, Economic Development Director

REVIEWED BY: Gina Gonzalez, Economic Development Director

APPROVED BY: Armando G. Villa, City Manager

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### **RECOMMENDED ACTION**

1. Discuss creating a Sister City Program for the City of Menifee and joining Sister City International (SCI) as a member.

### **DISCUSSION**

At the request of the City Council, staff was asked to bring back a discussion item on the possibility of becoming a Sister City.

### **BACKGROUND**

When a community of any size or character joins with a community in another nation to learn more about each other and to develop friendly and meaningful exchanges, the two may propose a formal affiliation leading to official designation as “sister cities”.

The ideal affiliation involves many citizens and organizations in both communities who are engaged in continuing projects of mutual interest. This interchange helps to further international understanding at all levels of the community on a continuing long-term basis. Within the Program, cities and their citizens exchange people, ideas, and culture in a variety of educational, municipal, professional, technical, and youth projects.

The Sister City Program was launched at a White House Conference in 1956 when President Dwight D. Eisenhower called for massive exchanges between Americans and the peoples of other lands. Hundreds of American cities responded to that call and are continuing to carry out meaningful exchanges with their partners in 136 nations around the world.

A sister or friendship city relationship is formally created when the Mayor or highest elected or appointed officials from two communities sign an agreement or Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) establishing the partnership.

However, this is usually the result of a long process that involves the local Sister City organization along with a city and other local institutions. While the process can also be very different for each community and can vary from culture to culture, the following is a part of the SCI, the lead organization who organizes memberships and a Sister Cities Program for over 50 cities.

### **Why have a Sister City?**

A Sister City Program enables the citizens of both communities to become directly involved in international relations in a unique and rewarding exchanges that benefit everyone. It enables all who participate to: exchange ideas and develop friendships with their counterparts in another culture on a direct personal basis; establish an identity as members of the global family involved in the constructive process of building world peace; develop a way for the many and diverse elements of each community to come together to enjoy and profit from a cooperative program; open new dialogues with the people of another culture to find unique solutions to improving the quality of life of all citizens; participate in a program with a real partner in another country so all members of the community can feel they are contributing to international understanding in a direct, personal way; and better understand their own community by interpreting their way of life to the people of another culture.

Nearly everyone works in a business or industry, has a hobby, goes to school, belongs to a service or professional society, or volunteers his or her time in any number of local organizations that can be linked to counterparts in another country. Thus, the linking of skills, crafts, and interests of people and organizations in both cities can enrich the newly formed sister city committee, open new avenues for program adventure, and secure the initial contacts you'll need to find an appropriate partner community. For a successful sister city partnership, partnership is on-going and isn't a single effort. Continuity is advised by SCI, with broad base activity.

By way of including schools, hobby groups, business, and professional organizations, scouting groups, service clubs, and so on. This list can then be sent to your partner to determine which organizations they have in their community to match yours. In some cases, a similar organization won't exist, then it is recommended the community could start one.

Sister City programs must always strive to ensure that each project undertaken by its members reflects the diversity of its network. Specifically, you should promote the inclusion of ethnic and racial minorities, people with disabilities, youth, women, and people of diverse socio-economic status in all sister city activities. Each project should be

planned with the knowledge that each person will be able to individually become a part of a person-to-person, organization-to-organization, city-to-city approach to citizen diplomacy. Above all, the uniqueness of the Sister City Program is that it is two-way.

Some successful projects that have been carried out successfully by other communities, depend on resources and ingenuity:

- Exchanges of visitors, officials, prominent citizens, musicians, students, teachers, professionals, media, radio and TV, labor, etc.
- Organized tours, including hospitality and ceremonies for visiting groups.
- Club affiliations, such as the development of relationships between such groups as Rotary, Lions, Boy and Girl Scouts, women's clubs, hobby clubs, etc. with their counterparts in the sister city.
- School affiliations can be a stimulating activity if organized within your educational system. They can be a strong adjunct to your school's language, history, cultural, and other programs.
- Technical and professional exchanges can have benefits both communities far in excess of the limited costs involved. Many communities have exchanged experts in transportation, housing, health care, the environment, public safety, and more.
- Art exhibits. Both school children and members of local art clubs exchange artwork with their international counterparts. The material is often exhibited publicly in both communities.
- Photo exhibits. Camera clubs exchange stills, slides, and documentary motion pictures.
- Sending of mementos, not on a charitable basis, but of mutual interest and respect. Gifts are generally modest.
- Exchange of music, recordings, and plays.
- Publications and preparation of food recipes with your international partner.

### **Planning process:**

The first step in developing a new sister city relationship is to ensure all participants are in concurrence. This would include the local Sister City organization and the highest elected/ranking official, provided this individual approves and formalizes the partnership. SCI, once a membership is created by a city, the city would be connected through the Connection Marketplace program by SCI.

### **Research phase:**

Sister city relationships are strategic, long-term partnerships that should be mutually beneficial. Identifying potential partners is the foundation to developing a successful relationship. If you don't already have a potential sister city in mind, below is a list of data points that communities should look for similarities when identifying potential partners.

- **Population size:** Some variance in city sizes is natural, but choosing a sister city of a similar size usually ensures good symmetry between municipal governments, community groups, private organizations, as well as similar challenges/opportunities
- **Geography:** Similar geographic qualities, whether it's ports, deserts, lakes, mountains, climate, etc. often means that cities will be able to share valuable knowledge related to the respective challenge or opportunity associated with each quality
- **Industries:** Potential commerce and trade partnerships
- **Academic institutions:** High school and university exchanges, which are often a part of any relationship, require similar counterpart institutions that should be identified early in the process
- **Cultural institutions:** This may include museums, music venues, community centers
- **Preexisting Relationships:** This may include, but is not limited to: mayoral relationships, trade relationships, expatriate/diaspora communities, faith-based groups, and personal experiences ranging from study/work abroad to marriages
- **Historical or ancestral connections:** Ethnic and/or cultural links

**Develop lines of communication:** The next step in the process is to develop a line of communication with the prospective sister city community. This may start by sending a letter of introduction from the city. The letter would introduce the community, identify why we are interested in developing a sister city relationship, identify potential program/exchange opportunities, and identify a point of contact for this initiative. This is when international protocol should be followed in order to ensure a positive experience. Provided symmetry is a key aspect of international protocol, if your local sister cities organization operates through the work of community volunteers it is good practice to identify a volunteer contact as well as a contact within the mayor's office. The SCI will work, as part of the membership, to connect a city with potential sister cities to consider.

**Correspondence phase:** Once the letter has been received by the perspective sister city and a line of communication has been established, the next several months should be focused on learning more about each other's communities, identifying program/exchange opportunities, discussing local involvement, and developing a work plan that establishes short- and long-term goals for the partnership. Many cultures will recommend a physical exchange during this phase, but often various means of technology is used to effectively communicate.

This period is also a great opportunity to implement a program to "test the waters". This program could include a youth pen pal exchange, municipal/professional best practice, or other knowledge-sharing exchanges, among many other opportunities. Many communities may send non-mayoral delegations during the correspondence and

planning stages-whether that be the city manager, council members, local business professionals, or volunteers.

**Develop partnership agreement:** Both communities have decided to move forward and formalize the relationship. In order for a sister city, partnership to be recognized by SCI, the two communities must sign formal documents which clearly endorse the link. The partnership agreement can range from the ceremonial, with language focusing on each city's commitment to fostering understanding, cooperation, and mutual benefit to the precise, with areas of interest, specific programs/activities, or more concrete goals related to anything from numbers of exchanges to economic development.

**Signing ceremony:** Once the partnership agreement has been developed and both communities have approved the document, the two highest ranking officials will sign the document, which is often done during a formal signing ceremony. This ceremony is usually an in-person event but can be virtual. While it is important to tailor these ceremonies to fit your specific communities.

**Implementation and evaluation:** The city would set a date, whether within the next six months to two years, to evaluate the partnership and make incremental adjustments.

The following are the listed benefits listed by SCI on developing a Sister City Program:

### **BENEFITS**

- Peer to Peer networking with sister city programs
- Connect with foreign communities
- Communication and possible partnerships with Foreign Direct Investment opportunities which leads to diversification of jobs locally in a downturn
- Exporting opportunities from partnership to increase revenues and grow jobs regionally
- Support from freight and domestic diplomatic Corps
- Marketing and communications assistance
- Recognition through annual awards
- Crisis communication
- Governance and Policy services
- Discount affinity benefits
- Toolkits (templates)

In 2018, SCI leveraged over 32,000 volunteers and more than 2000 sister city events in the United States, trained 99 young diplomats ages 14-18 at the annual Youth Leadership Conference, created over 3700 jobs through their network, involved more than 24,000 people in exchanges, provided over \$400,000 in humanitarian assistance to a variety of communities, and allowed over 500 citizen diplomats to work in the annual conference.

The cost of the SCI membership is \$1,030 annually for cities with a community population of 100,000-300,000. There would be an additional cost for keys, delegation events, and travel for City Council representatives and city leadership. In addition, for any program development there would be an additional cost for sister city travel for City Council for a total program support estimate of \$20,000 annually. For years where there is no travel need or requested, the estimated program support is \$9,000 annually (membership, keys, and city event coordination, no travel).

Staff recommends that City Council discuss the opportunity and need for a Sister City Program and joining SCI.

### **STRATEGIC PLAN OBJECTIVE**

Livable and Economically Prosperous Community

### **FISCAL IMPACT**

The current fiscal impact for this item is an annual membership of \$1,030 (based on 2020 membership costs) for populations of 100,000-300,000 people with SCI. Program expenses would consist of staff time, and city council travel occasionally, and the program support is estimated to cost between \$9,000-\$20,000 annually depending on travel needs and requests. This item, if approved by the City Council, would be a part of the FY 2023/2024 Budget cycle.

### **ATTACHMENTS**

1. List of Cities Seeking Partnerships