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## **A Plan for Strengthening the Montgomery Sister Cities Program**

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### **Background**

Montgomery Sister Cities (MSC) was established in 2009 as a community nonprofit to serve as the county government’s partner to create and advance a Sister City program. In its first decade under the leadership of Montgomery Sister Cities and County Executive Ike Leggett, Montgomery County established Sister City relationships in the five countries of origin with the county’s largest immigrant populations:

- Morazán, El Salvador (2011);
- Gondar, Ethiopia (2012);
- Xi’an, China (2014);

- Hyderabad, India (2014); and
- Daejeon, South Korea (2017).

County Executive Marc Elrich and Office of Community Partnerships director Diane Vu are committed to strengthening and deepening each of these relationships as a means of advancing community engagement, global education, cultural understanding, and economic development. They asked me to study what is working and what needs to be improved and to provide an implementation plan for strengthening each of our five Sister City relationships.

This project was done in three distinct parts:

First, in April and May of 2020, I interviewed 32 stakeholders in 23 separate interviews. Attachment Two on pages 54-56 is a list of those interviewed. These interviews formed the basis of a preliminary report of May 25, 2020 with specific recommendations and a schedule of recommended programs and activities for 2020 and 2021.

Second, a Sister Cities survey was conducted from May 27 to June 3, 2020. The survey was sent to approximately 3,100 persons, including the email list of the Office of Community Partnerships and a small number of others not on the list who had expressed interest in the Sister Cities program. The emailed invitation to participate generated 228 usable responses. As the recipients of the survey were largely predisposed to favor efforts to showcase Montgomery County's diversity, the survey was not intended to be a traditional random sample survey. It did produce valuable information cited throughout this report. Attachment Three on pages 57-61 is an executive summary of the survey results. I am grateful to Sid Groeneman, a public opinion and marketing research professional, for his exceptional work preparing and conducting this survey, to Nazaret Berhane for her assistance in helping compile the names and email addresses for the sample, and to the Montgomery County Volunteer Center for matching me with such outstanding volunteers.

Third, in June of 2020, I interviewed 46 more people in 14 separate interviews (for a total of 78 interviewees in 37 separate interviews). These interviewees are listed in Attachment Two on pages 54-56. The June interviews included a follow-up interview with the members of the board of Montgomery Sister Cities to review

the recommendations from my preliminary report and interviews with Sister City committee members for the Morazán, El Salvador; Gondar, Ethiopia; and Xi'an, China Sister Cities. In addition, to learn from best practices of Sister City organizations across the country regarding issues raised by stakeholders in the first round of interviews, I interviewed the former CEO of Sister Cities International and representatives from Sister Cities in Albuquerque, New Mexico; Columbus, Ohio; Fort Worth, Texas; Lexington, Kentucky; and San Antonio, Texas. I am grateful to Dean Suozzi-Auberry, Membership Manager at Sister Cities International, for identifying the five Sister Cities organizations.

The goals of this study were to:

- (1) review the mission statement for Montgomery Sister Cities for the program's second decade to find an agreed upon balance of community engagement and economic development aspirations;
- (2) recommend an organizational and staff structure that advances the mission and goals while respecting and serving the interests of all stakeholders and promoting collaboration among all stakeholders;
- (3) recommend a mix of County government and private funding adequate to support a program sustainable for the long term without undue burden on County taxpayers;
- (4) recommend proposals to energize the five Sister City committees by developing program activities between mission trips;
- (5) recommend a specific implementation plan for the remainder of 2020 and all of 2021 designed to advance the mission and goals of the Montgomery Sister Cities program.

## **Overview: Strengths & Weaknesses of the Montgomery Sister City Program**

A great strength of the Montgomery Sister Cities program is that it represents the five countries of origin with the county's largest immigrant populations. By educating the wider community about the cultures of our neighbors from around the world, Sister Cities builds understanding and brings us together. Thanks in part to the Sister Cities program and such events as the annual World of Montgomery Festival and other programs and activities showcasing and celebrating the County's extraordinary diversity, Montgomery County is widely

regarded as one of the nation's most welcoming communities. Being a talent magnet for people from across the world is Montgomery County's greatest asset in the global marketplace of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

With the ancient capitals of China and Ethiopia, India's city of pearls, and the geographic center of the Salvadoran Civil War, Montgomery's Sister Cities represent an extraordinary panorama of world history and civilization dating from the first know humans of four million years ago to modern times. Travelling to Montgomery County's Sister Cities is an extraordinary adventure to some of the world's most treasured heritage sites.

Most importantly, the Montgomery Sister City program has been a very important tool in developing relationships with previously underrepresented and underserved ethnic and faith communities. Prior to the Sister City program, two of Montgomery's largest and most important immigrant populations were grossly underrepresented and underserved by county government. The Sister City program built important lines of communication between the county government and the Salvadoran and Ethiopian communities.

The glaring weakness of the Sister Cities program is the lack of follow-up to the hopes and promises developed during our initial trips to our Sister Cities. The robust participation in the planning of mission trips faded completely after the Sister City signing ceremonies in India and South Korea. While there have been real achievements and return visits to our Sister Cities in El Salvador, Ethiopia, and China, activities even among these Sister Cities had dwindled long before Covid-19 put the world in lockdown. If the Sister City program is no more than a series of excellent tourism opportunities without meaningful achievements in terms of community engagement and economic development, there is no justification for using county resources and taxpayer dollars.

In an attempt to limit taxpayer dollars in difficult budget years, the Sister City program has not had the resources it has needed to realize its full potential. Without a sustainable support staff and stronger guidance from the Montgomery Sister Cities board, the volunteer led Sister City committees have floundered. This lack of staff and volunteer capacity and continuity is all the more challenging in the face of turnover of political leadership here and in our Sister Cities.

There are equity issues as well. Because there is more potential for economic development in some of our Sister Cities than in others, some of our volunteer leaders worry that resources will not be distributed equitably to all of the Sister City programs. Others express concern that the Sister Cities program focuses too much on strengthening our interests in Montgomery County and not enough on the interests of the people in our Sister Cities. Patronizing attitudes can undermine the ethical principles of engagement that should be the hallmark of a Sister City program.

## **Summary Highlights of Recommendations**

### **Areas of Broad Consensus**

1. Strengthen the five Sister City relationships we have before adding new Sister Cities.
2. Reenergize the Sister City committees and focus on developing program activities between mission trips.
3. Dedicate at least one full-time staff person with administrative support to the Sister Cities program.
4. Financial support will need to come from county government for at least the next 18 months while the economy recovers and a case is built for partial private financing.
5. While it is unlikely we will be able to travel to our Sister Cities for at least 18 months, this time can be used productively to strengthen the MSC board, reenergize the Sister City committees, and reconnect to our Sister Cities.

### **Recommendations: Mission & Goals**

Put the mission statement in the active voice: “Montgomery Sister Cities connects Montgomery County to the world....”

Continue with the five major goals while recognizing there will be different priorities for different countries at different times:

1. Creating a Welcoming Environment.
2. Community Engagement.
3. Economic Development.

4. Preparing Global Citizens for the Future.
5. Humanitarian Assistance.

### **Recommendations: Montgomery Sister Cities Board of Directors**

1. Make the MSC Board of Directors more representative of Montgomery County's diversity and ensure active participation from representatives of all the Sister City committees and from major stakeholder partner organizations.
2. Ensure that the MSC board plays a much stronger role in providing guidance to the five Sister City committees. Convene a meeting of all members of the committees to discuss expectations. To ensure accountability, the board must commit to put any Sister City committee that fails to comply on inactive status.
3. Develop a public relations and marketing plan to lift the visibility of the organization.
4. Develop a comprehensive plan for raising private dollars to support the program.

### **Recommendations: Sister City Committees**

1. Broaden representation and participation for all five Sister City committees.
2. Each of the five Sister City committees must develop operating procedures for ensuring basic accountability to the board and to the public.
3. Each of the five Sister City committees must provide two members to serve on the MSB board.
4. Each of the five Sister Cities must submit an annual plan to the MSC board committing to keep in touch with its Sister City and to organize a minimum of two public events.

### **Recommendations: Sister City Partners**

1. County Executive should establish a Global Engagement Coordinating Council with representation from Montgomery Sister Cities, Montgomery County Council, Montgomery College, Montgomery Public Schools (MCPS),

The Universities at Shady Grove, KID Museum, and the Montgomery County Economic Development Corporation (MCEDC). The Sister Cities staff person will support the Council.

2. Montgomery College Television should collaborate with the Sister City committees, County's Office of Community Partnerships, College's Office of Community Engagement, and the KID Museum to develop virtual Sister City programming.
3. MCPS staff from the academic side and the community engagement side should meet with county government staff and representatives of the Montgomery Sister Cities program to develop a Sister Schools program.
4. MCEDC staff should be available to consult with Montgomery Sister Cities about marketing and fundraising strategies as well as identify economic development opportunities that will advantage Montgomery County and our Sister Cities.

### **Discussion of Goals of Sister City Programs**

In developing the objectives of a Sister Cities program, consider five possible goals:

1. Creating a Welcoming Environment. Broadening the understanding of Montgomery County officials and the public at large about the cultures of the people who have come here from every corner of the globe through cultural exchanges. These educational and cultural exchanges are the essence of the people-to-people citizen diplomacy envisioned by President Eisenhower in his initial vision for the Sister Cities program in the 1950s.
2. Community Engagement. Developing relationships with previously underrepresented and underserved ethnic and faith communities. Building connections between county officials and underserved communities gives county officials a deeper understanding of the needs of our residents and a greater ability to serve them.
3. Economic Development. Developing economic development opportunities for Montgomery County businesses and bringing new businesses to Montgomery County while helping to strengthen the economies of our Sister Cities.
4. Preparing Global Citizens for the Future. Promoting trips for high school and college students to give them the opportunity to broaden their skills,

deepen their sense of humanity, and thrive in the global marketplace of the future.

5. Humanitarian Assistance. Building houses, donating computers, providing equipment and supplies to hospitals are examples of humanitarian projects that support those in need in our Sister Cities.

For the first decade of Montgomery Sister Cities under County Executive Ike Leggett's leadership, creating a welcoming environment and community engagement were the program's main objectives. Stewardship rested with the Montgomery Sister Cities community nonprofit and the County's Office of Community Partnerships (OCP). Montgomery College played a significant role by engaging faculty and students. Economic development and humanitarian assistance were lesser but not insignificant goals.

Going forward, the organizational and staff structure must serve the mission and goals established for the program. If the most important goal is to promote economic development, the Montgomery County Economic Development Corporation (MCEDC) would play a lead role. If preparing global citizens for the future is the primary objective, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS), Montgomery College, and The Universities at Shady Grove (USG) would take the lead. We need to know the outcomes we desire to be able to build a structure best able to deliver the desired outcomes.

Looking to develop a plan for the next decade, I asked key stakeholders their opinions of these goals. Their thoughts are summarized below.

### **Creating a Welcoming Environment**

Broadening the understanding of Montgomery County officials and the public at large about the cultures of the people who have come here from every corner of the globe as part of the county's effort to become one of the nation's most welcoming communities was the initial motivation for starting the Montgomery Sister Cities program.

MSC board members were especially outspoken about the value of Sister Cities in creating a welcoming community. Tracey-Alexis Dixon says learning about the different cultures in our county is the foundation of the Sister Cities program. We

have informed public officials and county residents about the cultures of the people who have come here from across the world, explains Dixon. Councilmember Craig Rice says the highest goal of Sister Cities is to make sure we understand and embrace the cultures and diversity of Montgomery County and provide a bridge to the home countries of our residents

Kasey Kaseman, the county's liaison to the faith communities, says the Sister Cities program provides participants with a deeper understanding and appreciation for each other. It broadens our perspectives and increases our skills, making us more effective in our work, according to Kaseman. Sarah Reddinger, program services director of Habitat for Humanity Metro Maryland, led several building trips to El Salvador. She says the mission experience led to conversations about immigration with their volunteers. Reddinger says some of the volunteers gained empathy and completely changed their views on immigration because of the trips.

Karla Silvestre, who served as the county's Latino liaison before becoming Montgomery College's community engagement director and an elected member of the Board of Education, says the Sister Cities experience demonstrated to communities that their public officials recognize them, and are learning about their history, culture, and current situation, and that we ultimately want their help building community here in the county. Sister Cities gives us the opportunity to facilitate communication, Silvestre explained, by providing the opportunity for government officials to learn how to speak community and community members how to speak government.

Salvadoran Sister City committee member Jorge Gonzalez says the Sister Cities program gave his community the opportunity to know county officials and to know that the county is interested in them. Eunmee Shim, who represented Adventist HealthCare on a trip to South Korea, points out that diversity alone is not a strength unless we figure out how to promote cultural integration. Monifa McKnight, MCPS deputy superintendent, says the question people ask is: "Do I feel like I fit in?" Our mission is to create a welcoming community by modeling inclusion through understanding and respecting our diverse cultures.

Montgomery College's Sanjay Rai says his passionate support for the Sister Cities program comes from the part it plays in making Montgomery County such a

welcoming community. As an immigrant in Montgomery County, he explains, he feels welcome, he feels valued. He doesn't just feel tolerated. All county leaders need to understand our immigrant communities, according to Rai.

Nan Qiao, president of Northwestern Chinese American Association of Greater Washington (NCAAGW) and a member of the Montgomery Sister Cities board, pointed out that too many people lose their connection to the places they come from. Sister Cities can help to maintain those connections.

### **Community Engagement**

While the initial purpose of creating a Sister Cities program was to support the county's effort to become one of the nation's most welcoming communities, we soon realized that the Sister Cities program was an important tool in developing relationships with previously underrepresented and underserved ethnic and faith communities.

People who fled civil war in El Salvador and Ethiopia to remake their lives in the United States did not instinctively engage with local government. People working multiple jobs to support their families do not have time for Montgomery County's robust system of advisory committees with regular meetings at 7 p.m. on the third Thursday of the month. As a result, the County Executive's ethnic advisory groups grossly underrepresented some of the major countries of origin of our immigrant population. The Latin American Advisory Group had virtually no members from Central America. The African Affairs Advisory Group had no members from Ethiopia.

Karla Silvestre, who served as the county's Latino liaison, identifies community engagement as the main strength of the Sister Cities program. She explains that it gives county officials an opportunity to engage with emerging immigrant groups and identify "go to" people in these communities. Silvestre says she became part of their networks. It helped her bridge the communication gap between immigrants and government officials.

Mumin Barre, acting chair of Montgomery Sister Cities, says the people-to-people relationships are the great strength of the Sister Cities program. He says it makes traditionally underrepresented communities feel they are members of a vibrant

and inclusive community. Alicia Hannon, a Montgomery Sister Cities board member, says the great strength of the Sister City program has been building bridges with local immigrant communities. Bob Levey, former senior fellow with Montgomery Sister Cities, explains that the program provides underrepresented communities with seats at the table.

Jorge Granados, who helped lead trips to his hometown in El Salvador, explains that immigrant communities build power by coming together. Community engagement, he says, is the main reason for Sister Cities. Solomon Ayele, who helped lead trips to his hometown in Ethiopia, says Sister Cities shows that both governments here and in Ethiopia and both peoples are committed to work together. That, according to Ayele, is the real asset of Sister Cities.

In addition to Silvestre, two other county staff members who were intimately engaged with the Sister Cities program and are also now elected officials testify that the Sister City trips and activities enabled them to serve the county's diverse immigrant population better. Councilmember Gabe Albornoz explains that trust is essential in serving communities. He says his Sister City trips to El Salvador gave him the ability to speak with greater authenticity about the challenges facing the Latino community. Delegate Lily Qi, who served as the county's Asian liaison, points out that it was good that our Sister Cities represent the countries that produced the largest numbers of immigrant residents. She explains the exposure through Sister Cities helps officials do a better job serving communities.

Reemberto Rodriguez says the Sister City trips had been "transformational" for him in terms of his job as the county's director for the Silver Spring region. Sanjay Rai, Montgomery College's vice president for academic affairs, explains that because of the Sister City trips, the county and the college are better able to serve our residents with a greater understanding of their needs. Mike Mills, Montgomery College's vice president for e-learning, innovation, and teaching excellence, says the program helps the county serve underrepresented communities.

### **Economic Development**

Economic development was not among the top goals of the first two mission trips of Montgomery Sister Cities to El Salvador (2011) and Ethiopia (2012). Developing

economic development opportunities for Montgomery County businesses and bringing new businesses to Montgomery County became a focus of the trips to China (2013), India (2014), and South Korea (2017). Drew Powell, president of the Rockville Sister City Corporation, points out that economic development was not part of President Eisenhower's initial vision in the 1950s for creating bonds between people from different cities around the world. It has become a significant part of Sister City programs established in recent decades especially in larger jurisdictions.

Bob Levey, former senior fellow with Montgomery Sister Cities, makes the case for raising the profile of economic development in this work most directly when he says that without it, Sister Cities is a "candy store idea."

Sanjay Rai, Montgomery College's vice president for academic affairs who serves on the board of the Montgomery County Economic Development Corporation (MCEDC), sees this as a top priority. We are part of a global economy, Rai notes. Sister Cities helps us make connections around the world. Rai says international mission trips are critical for the economic success of our county. He says the Sister City trip to India in 2014 was a catalyst for the Infosys Public Services headquarters locating in Rockville. Education, economic development, and culture are not three different things, according to Rai. They must converge. The Sister Cities program is the platform to bring the three together, according to Rai.

Eunmee Shim, president of the Fort Washington Medical Center of Adventist HealthCare who went on the trip to South Korea in 2017, points to the shortage of nurses in the Washington region to explain that Adventist HealthCare needed to break past the boundaries of the United States and look for global solutions to their staffing needs. Adventist HealthCare is offering jobs to 28 South Korean nurses with the hope they will be here as early as late summer or early fall 2020.

Matthew Lee, who serves on the MCEDC board, came to the United States from South Korea at the age of 19 and has operated a small business here for three decades. He is an advocate for bringing South Korean businesses to Montgomery County. He explains that a strong economic development emphasis will benefit cultural and educational exchanges. Lee points out that South Korea has lots of trade shows and international conferences that Montgomery County should utilize to make broader connections.

Ben Wu, president and CEO of the Montgomery County Economic Development Corporation (MCEDC) and former deputy secretary the Maryland's Department of Commerce, knows from experience that trade missions done properly can be very important. Governor Hogan's 2015 trade mission trip to South Korea, China, and Japan produced \$13 billion in commitments, Maryland's most successful trade mission ever. With the Governor heading the delegation and through engagement with the federal government and the embassies, participants were able to meet with top officials in all three countries.

The interest in creating a greater economic development profile for Sister Cities is not limited to the participants in the China, India, and South Korea Sister Cities. Councilmember Rice sees potential for some kind of investment in all of our Sister Cities. There is so much potential with the farmers in Gondar to take just one example, according to Rice. Councilmember Albornoz points out that when economic development opportunities lead to better results in the home countries, it benefits our residents here in Montgomery County. MSC board member Alicia Hannon notes that economic development provides a direct way to change lives by creating wealth in our Sister Cities. MCPS deputy superintendent Monifa McKnight says economic development brings a future to our students. MCPS attempts to give its students a global perspective that elevates knowledge, culture, and enrichment in our community.

Not everyone agrees economic development should be a priority of a Sister Cities program. Former County Councilmember George Leventhal, now director of community health at Kaiser Permanente, says one-on-one international business relations provide benefits but that MCEDC would be a better vehicle for building those relations than Sister Cities.

Drew Powell, president of the Rockville Sister City Corporation, says he refers economic development prospects to Rockville Economic Development, Inc. (REDI). Beth Weibel of Fort Worth Sister Cities International explains the role of her Sister Cities organization is as a connector to the Chamber of Commerce and Fort Worth's Economic Development Department. She says Sister Cities introduces people to each other. Richard Buckler of Albuquerque Sister Cities Foundation reports Sister Cities' role is to bring people together. He is proud that

his organization has a reputation among city officials of being good at making connections.

Lily Qi, who played a leadership role in organizing Sister City trips to China, India, and South Korea as the assistant chief administrative officer responsible for economic development in the Leggett administration, agreed with Powell and the other Sister City organizations that Sister Cities can realistically play only a limited role in promoting economic development. According to Qi, the role of the County Executive is to make the introduction to the businesses and then leave it to the experts at MCEDC to consummate the deals. Qi emphasized how difficult it is to close these deals – it takes good data and research as well as staff who speak the language and have the willingness to make calls across different time zones. Councilmember Rice says Sister Cities' role is to give the Montgomery County Economic Development Corporation a platform to do its thing as MCEDC did on the trip to South Korea and China in 2017.

Ben Wu of MCEDC agrees, explaining that you don't always sign a deal at the first meeting. The trade mission is often the first step in the process. If you want a strong relationship, you want to make connections that outlast the terms of political officials. But Wu warns that not every Sister City has an economy mature enough to justify the effort. It can be awkward trying to force an economic development element into every Sister Cities relationship. He notes that can change over time as a Sister City's economic capacity grows. Albuquerque's Buckler concurs that not every city is a great match for economic development.

Albuquerque's Buckler explains that international relations present opportunities. The payoff isn't instant. Sometimes the slow and steady way is the best. Eunmee Shim of Adventist HealthCare points out that landing a United States headquarters of a major corporation doesn't often happen as a first step. It takes time to build relationships and develop interest. There is a role for the kind of relationship building that comes through Sister Cities. A corporate executive might first learn of Montgomery County through a vacation trip or a child coming here for college. Martha Henry of San Antonio's International Relations Office tells a story about how the Toyota manufacturing and assembly plant came to San Antonio. She says San Antonio won the plant because of the Sister City relationship the city has with Japan. Our officials and community leaders, she

explains, understood the Japanese play the long game and place importance on developing trust and relationships.

Sabrina Lei, former president of Northwestern Chinese American Association of Greater Washington, warns that economic development is important but it will take more time because the United States and China have two different economic systems. We need experts with us to do this right, she warns. People need to be sure the money they invest in another country will be protected.

The economic development goal does have the potential of conflict. Evelyn Gonzalez, who led the planning for Montgomery's first Sister City in Morazán, El Salvador, points out that more top officials went to China and India than to El Salvador. If you want discontent, she warns, focus on economic development. Be conscientious about equity or people will become disenchanted. All the Sister Cities have a lot to offer, says Gonzalez.

### **Preparing Global Citizens for the Future**

Members of the Montgomery Sister Cities board gave their highest ranking to the goal of promoting trips for high school and college students to give them the opportunity to broaden their skills and enable them to thrive in the global marketplace of the future. Clemmie Solomon, MSC board member and retired Montgomery College dean, said we should be helping the next generation build the skills needed to function in the global marketplace. Broadening their horizons and helping them gain an understanding of others will have a life changing impact on students.

Brad Colton, a Marriott executive who has served as chair of Leadership Montgomery, works closely with young missionaries of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Colton says the only way to prepare to be a global citizen is to travel. You cannot get this in the classroom. He points out that the 18 to 25 year olds he works with are at an impressionable age. They develop a great love for the people and the culture where they serve.

Cinder Cooper Barnes, the new director of Montgomery College's Global Humanities Institute, affirms that travel changes lives, but notes that funding for travel is challenging. The College has money for some travel scholarships, but

Barnes points out that is not sufficient if a student is not financially able to take time off from work to travel. Mike Mills, Montgomery College's vice president for e-learning, innovation, and teaching excellence, confirms that many of the College's students don't have the funds to travel, but suggests the Sister Cities program could give them that opportunity. While the College does have a successful Travel Abroad program, according to Mills, the trips do not focus on the international communities resident in the county.

Former Sister Cities senior fellow and Montgomery College board member Bob Levey says this goal could move forward if stewardship for Sister Cities was moved under the tent of MCPS, the College, or The Universities of Shady Grove. Board of Education member and College community engagement director Karla Silvestre says while there is work to be done to improve the multicultural skills of MCPS and the College, she does not think it is necessary that students travel because they are already living in a super diverse community.

Sanjay Rai, the College's vice president for academic affairs, adds that building the skills of students makes the county more marketable to large global companies. Rai says the College is working to make its curriculum more global. A National Humanities Endowment (NEH) grant allowed the College to create a Global Humanities Institute (GHI) with a focus on teaching the humanities in ways that reflect the complexities of our global society. Former GHI director Rita Kranidis credits the Montgomery Sister Cities program with helping the College secure academic partnerships in China, El Salvador, and India. Montgomery College students shared virtual classrooms with students at the University of El Salvador, and College faculty benefitted from a Seminars Abroad program hosted by Xi'an University. Several College representatives say the College is still fragmented in its global approach. Plans to strengthen coordination in focusing on building cultural competence and global awareness among faculty and students have had to take a back seat to the Covid-19 crisis, they explain.

Drew Powell says the Rockville Sister City Corporation has had some success but also some frustrations working with local schools. The most recent success story came in October of 2019 when ten students from the Richard Montgomery High School Jazz Band travelled with two faculty members to Taiwan to perform at the Yilan International Art Festival. Powell reports it was a life-changing experience

for the students. Powell says it would be helpful if MCPS would develop clear policy and procedures regarding international travel by students and faculty.

Councilmember Craig Rice, chair of the County Council's Education & Culture Committee, says Montgomery Sister Cities should "enhance" the education of the youth in our Sister Cities from a respectful position of continued sharing. We need to link our students with students in our Sister Cities, according to Rice, as some of our students don't realize how big the world is. We should start with one Sister School in each Sister City. We should be sharing best practices. He reports that his Sister Cities trip to Xi'an helped shape his work on the Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education developing the Blueprint for Maryland's Future. Sharon Ledner, Rice's chief of staff, says discussions with MCPS focused on creating teacher training hubs so our impact can be beyond a single Sister School.

MCPS deputy superintendent Monifa McKnight says MCPS wants to give its students a global experience and wants them to experience culture by making it real and relevant to them. She pledges to get MCPS staff from the academic side and the community engagement side together with county government staff and representatives of the Montgomery Sister Cities program to map out a vision for Sister Schools. She says that a focus from her office and the superintendent's office will allow MCPS to target resources and strengthen Sister Schools programs. McKnight says legal counsel will need to be part of the discussion as MCPS revisits policies and procedures regarding travel particularly in light of the Covid-19 experience.

McKnight wants school principals to travel and experience culture in order learn how to support their students. Board of Education member Karla Silvestre explains that test taking in Ethiopia, for example, is very different than it is here. Understanding this is basic cultural competence.

Sister Cities International (SCI) has in recent years promoted the establishment of Sister Schools. SCI's Sister Schools goals are to:

- integrate the Sister Cities model of citizen diplomacy into youth and education;
- offer "people-to-people" connections to students; and
- motivate cultural exchange and global awareness among students through project-based learning.

SCI has prepared a toolkit to help promote the Sister Schools concept. SCI identifies Sister Schools partnerships as between individual classes, entire schools, or even school districts. SCI recommends starting with its Class to Class model, partnering a single class at each school to work together to design and complete projects. Teachers can pair their students as pen pals. Starting with the Class to Class model does not stop the entire schools from celebrating the partnership.

In addition to Sister Schools, student exchanges are popular among Sister City programs. When Fort Worth Sister Cities International was named 2018 Best Overall Program by Sister Cities International, the award cited 19 outbound exchanges and 22 inbound exchanges involving 400 people. In 2019, there were 16 outbound trips and 18 inbound trips involving 406 people. Most outbound trips involve 12 to 15 people. The majority of the outbound trips involve youth. There are typically two or three outbound trips for adults each year.

Lexington Sister Cities Commission takes approximately 50 students on exchange programs each year to its four Sister Cities. Each of the 50 students is matched with a student in a Sister City. The students pay the airfare and stay with their host family. They have fundraisers to provide scholarships for the airfare for four to six students each year.

Albuquerque Sister Cities Foundation typically has two youth exchanges each year. Japan and Germany are its regular partners. Ten to fifteen students go on each exchange trip, and within one year those students host the students who had hosted them.

The mayor of Gondar, Ethiopia has requested scholarships to bring 25 high school students to Montgomery County. These students would be sponsored and hosted by local families.

The Study Abroad program of the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) appears to be among the most impressive in the nation. Each year hundreds of DCPS middle and high school students travel abroad. Private donations covered the entire cost of the program in the start-up years. The program is now fully

funded in the city's budget. DCPS is providing life changing opportunities for its students.

Some Sister City programs see economic development potential in providing educational opportunity for students from their Sister Cities. International students invest considerable commitment and money in their education and can generate a substantial economic impact in a local community. Martha Henry of San Antonio's International Relations Office says San Antonio wants to develop as a higher education hub.

Mary Kane, former president and CEO of Sister Cities International, says a decade ago that the president of the University of Toledo was discussing with the mayor how the university could fill all its dormitory beds. The mayor suggested offering in-state tuition to students coming from the city's Sister Cities. It worked. And soon the parents wanted to visit and tourism increased. The University of New Mexico established a 40% cost reduction for students from Albuquerque Sister Cities.

Evelyn Gonzalez, a leader of the Morazán, El Salvador committee, warns not just to prepare U.S. kids to get ahead in the global marketplace, but to focus on making the students humanitarians. MSC board members Yasin Yiman and Clemmie Solomon say Montgomery College's Study Abroad trip to Ethiopia in 2016 did just that. Yiman observes that the trip helped sensitize the students to be more grateful for what they have here. Solomon says the education that occurred during the trip resulted in a lasting impression about Ethiopia and the significant role it has played in history.

### **Humanitarian Assistance**

For the first twenty interviews, I only asked stakeholders about the four major goals of Sister City programs identified above. Former Maryland Delegate Aruna Miller suggests there should be a fifth possible goal – providing humanitarian assistance. Many immigrant communities embrace humanitarian causes and this would appeal to them, she points out. The Sister Cities survey we conducted as part of this study backs her up as participating in a humanitarian service project ranked with learning about a new culture as respondents' main reasons for joining a Sister Cities trip.

Many of the mission trips undertaken by Montgomery Sister Cities included presentations of computers, sports equipment, and musical instruments to local groups in our Sister Cities. In addition, there have been two projects that rise to level of humanitarian support Delegate Miller envisions.

Habitat for Humanity Metro Maryland, under the leadership of executive director John Paukstis and director of program services Sarah Reddinger, built 24 houses and repaired 45 others in Morazán's El Barrial community over a several year period. Habitat led a dozen trips, raised \$500,000, and engaged 80 volunteers. While Habitat first went to Morazán as part of the County Executive's 2011 Sister Cities trip, the Salvadoran Sister City committee never fully embraced the Habitat project as one of its projects.

Montgomery County Council President George Leventhal led a mission trip to Morazán in 2015. The highlight was a presentation by Councilmember Leventhal of donated medical equipment to the Hospital de Gotera along with a check for \$11,000 from donations he collected from Montgomery County businesses and residents that was used to modernize the hospital's neonatal care center. Councilmember Albornoz, Salvadoran activist Jorge Granados, and MSC board member Roman Santillan all mentioned in their interviews how impressed they were with the hospital project.

Eunmee Shim of Adventist HealthCare warns to be careful. Humanitarian missions require lots of preparation. She points out that Americans can be presumptuous about what our Sister Cities might need. Shim suggests humanitarian actions should be part of a follow-up only after we have a clear understanding of the needs and wants of the Sister City.

Former Councilmember George Leventhal, whose support of the hospital in El Salvador was one of the two most substantive humanitarian projects in the first decade of Montgomery Sister Cities, says he worries that the computers and hospital equipment and supplies we took to El Salvador might not have been useful, or may have become obsolete quickly. He suggests there are other groups that can do this work.

Mary Kane, former president and CEO of Sister Cities International, agrees it is not enough to donate computers and medical equipment. She tells of being in a Nigerian hospital and seeing a sonogram machine sitting in the corner. When she asked why it wasn't being used, she learned that no one knew how to run it. Kane says a Sister City that undertakes a humanitarian project needs to see it through. You need to train people. You need to stay in touch to make sure you can supply a part that needs to be replaced. This can all be done via Zoom, Kane points out.

Both Delegate Miller and Councilmember Leventhal agree on this point: any humanitarian effort undertaken must have tangible, measurable goals. While proud of the hospital project, Leventhal notes that it was time-consuming as it required lots of phone calls to recruit donors and secure supplies from hospitals. He concludes these humanitarian projects are complicated and difficult.

When asked how Sister Cities might recruit other community partner organizations for humanitarian projects, John Paukstis of Habitat suggests that a community partner would need to have an interest in the part of the world where the Sister City is and an ability to mobilize resources. Paukstis explains that Habitat was able to marshal the resources for the El Barrial housing project because Habitat has a tithe policy that each affiliate must spend ten percent of its unrestricted fundraising on programs in the world's poorest places. He suggests we consider recruiting faith organizations. Silver Spring region director Reemberto Rodriguez and Geraldina Dominguez of NIH suggest that Rotary International would be a potential partner on humanitarian projects.

Councilmember Rice points out that while humanitarian assistance is something many of us care about, it is the responsibility of the federal government not our local government. That is why, explains Rice, when the Mayor of Gondar visited Montgomery County, he took him to meet with United States Senator Van Hollen. We shouldn't try to take on too much, Rice warns.

## **Areas of Broad Consensus**

The interviews revealed five areas of broad consensus:

1. We need to strengthen the five Sister City relationships we have before adding new Sister Cities.

2. To strengthen the five Sister City relationships, we need to reenergize the Sister City committees and focus on developing program activities between mission trips.
3. The Sister Cities program needs at least one full-time dedicated staff person with administrative support.
4. Financial support will need to come from county government for at least the next 18 months while the economy recovers and a case is built for partial private financing.
5. While it is unlikely we will be able to travel to our Sister Cities for at least 18 months, this time can be used productively to strengthen the MSC board, reenergize the Sister City committees, and reconnect to our Sister Cities.

**First, we need to strengthen the five Sister City relationships we have before adding new Sister Cities.**

Virtually everyone agrees that the Montgomery Sister City program needs to focus on strengthening the five Sister Cities we have rather than adding new Sister Cities.

From 2011 to 2014, Montgomery County added a new Sister City each year -- Morazán, El Salvador in 2011; Gondar, Ethiopia in 2012; Xi'an, China in 2013 (formalized in 2014); and Hyderabad, India in 2014. At that point, the program intentionally paused for three years with the explicit purpose of strengthening the four existing Sister City relationships. In 2017, the county added Daejeon, South Korea as our fifth Sister City.

Montgomery Sister Cities has been highly successful in signing Sister City agreements with cities of extraordinary historic importance representing the five countries of origin with the county's largest immigrant populations. Two of our Sister Cities – Gondar, Ethiopia and Xi'an, China -- are ancient capitals. Hyderabad is known as India's City of Pearls. El Salvador's Museum of the Revolution is located in Morazán.

When asked to identify the main weakness of the Montgomery Sister City program, interviewees say the same thing over and over – the lack of follow-up after the mission trips. Kasey Kaseman, the county's liaison to the faith communities, makes the point most directly. According to Kaseman, we go on

exciting trips and establish wonderful relationships, but then we come home to our emails and meetings and don't stay in touch. Our relationships with our Sister Cities, Kaseman concludes, are laced with broken promises and guilt.

Former Councilmember George Leventhal does not believe the county government should support a Sister Cities program. He argues if you do have a program, it should be limited to one or two Sister Cities. Otherwise, Leventhal says, you dilute the focus by spreading the program too thin. Given the limited investment of county staff and resources, this is what has happened. At first, when there were only the Sister Cities in El Salvador and Ethiopia, the staff liaisons to the Latino and African communities were able to maintain ongoing support for the program. As we added three Sister Cities all in Asian countries, the task became unsustainable given the limited staff support.

Diane Vu, previously the county's liaison to the Asian community and now director of the Office of Community Partnerships, made this point forcefully to the Montgomery Sister Cities board when she explained how time and resource consuming the process is to select a new Sister City and plan and implement a mission trip.

MSC acting chair Mumin Barre and MSC board member Tracey-Alexis Dixon have asked if we have standards for maintaining a Sister City that might give the board an opportunity to drop one when appropriate. Sister Cities International has rules requiring notification when a Sister City relationship has been placed in emeritus status or terminated. Emeritus status would seem more desirable as termination would likely be misunderstood by those who had emigrated from the Sister City and others.

<https://sistercities.org/sites/default/files/2014%20SCI%20Affiliation%20Policy.pdf>

While interest has been expressed in Sister Cities in Cameroon and Sierra Leone and a concern noted that we have no Sister Cities in Latin America, virtually no one advocates adding a new Sister City until we solve the very real problem of lack of follow-up to the mission trips. If the Sister City program is no more than a series of excellent tourism opportunities without meaningful achievements in terms of community engagement and economic development, there is no justification for using county resources and taxpayer dollars.

The first step on the road to sustainability is a commitment not to add new Sister Cities until we have built a strong foundation under the ones we have now.

**Second, to strengthen the five Sister City relationships, we need to reenergize the Sister City committees and focus on developing program activities between mission trips.**

As described above, the main weakness of the Montgomery Sister Cities program is a lack of follow-up to the mission trips. When the County Executive and Montgomery Sister Cities were considering adding a Sister City in the 2010s, there was generally lots of energy and activity in the group advocating the new Sister City. Planning for the mission trips engaged many people. The mission trip delegations included between 40 and 80 people each. The trips were generally viewed as quite successful.

Instead of being merely the starting point for a long and successful relationship, the mission trips have too often marked the end of meaningful contact. The Salvadoran Sister City committee has been the most successful at staying focused, raising funds, and planning return visits. The Ethiopian Sister City committee has continued to function and organized a return visit in 2019. The Northwestern Chinese American Association of Greater Washington (NCAAGW) serves as our Sister City committee for Xi'an and has a robust program of activities. A mission delegation returned to Xi'an in 2017. Sadly, there has been absolutely no follow-up by Sister City committees after the trips to India in 2014 and South Korea in 2017.

To avoid Sister City agreements being mere paper documents, as Solomon Ayele of the Gondar Ethiopian committee says, we need to create programs, not just trips. County faith community liaison Kasey Kaseman points to Rockville as an example of a Sister City program with ongoing programs and opportunities to build relationships between mission trips. Drew Powell, president of the Rockville Sister City Corporation (RSCC), explains that RSCC organizes an annual Lantern Festival Event and a Bubble Tea Festival each year among other events.

Two veterans of the Sister City program who were leaders of our most successful and lasting engagements are particularly outspoken about the program's failures

in recent years. Jorge Granados, a leader of the Salvadoran Sister City committee, notes that in the early years there was a strong Sister City committee that had staff support from the county's Latino liaison. Over time, he said, the group lost focus as staff support declined. As a result, according to Granados, the people who wanted to do projects left the committee. Solomon Ayele, a leader of the Ethiopian Sister City committee and a former member of the MSC board, points out that there are almost no activities except when there are trips to plan. Ayele notes what he calls a structural problem. He says the committees need bylaws. They need guidance from the MSC board.

Montgomery Sister Cities acting board chair Mumin Barre says the relationship between the MSC board and the Sister City committees is fuzzy. Barre says the committees need to take the lead in planning activities between mission trips, but the board should require the committees to submit an annual plan of events with priorities and budgets. Former county Latino liaison Karla Silvestre suggests each committee select two activities to work on each year.

Aruna Miller was most outspoken about the need to overhaul the makeup of the current Montgomery Sister Cities board and to make sure the membership of the board and the Sister City committees are fully reflective of the diversity of the county. She recommends the board be 50% female and 50% male and that it include a female and male representative from each of the five Sister Cities. She recommends the board include a female student and a male student.

Rockville's Drew Powell stresses the importance of a broad based leadership to give the program the continuity needed as elected leadership in Montgomery County and the Sister Cities change over time.

Business executive Matthew Lee points out that broad community engagement is needed to sustain the work of the committees. If only one or two people are leading each of the committees, they will fail. Solomon Ayele notes that both the MSC board and the Ethiopian Sister City committee believe the committee should be made up exclusively of Ethiopians. Ayele says the committee needs people who represent all of Montgomery County, not just people from Gondar and not just Ethiopians. Councilmember Rice observes that as with many aspects of county government, we need to continue to expand our outreach beyond the insiders. There are many people in the know who want to represent their home

city and country. According to Rice, we need to grow the program to include the broader community.

MSC acting board chair Mumin Barre recommends the board make sure each Sister City committee has representatives from business and education. Cinder Cooper Barnes, director of Montgomery College's Global Humanities Institute, recommends adding students and faculty from the college to the committees. Kasey Kaseman and Councilmember Gabe Albornoz both recommend greater participation from faith community representatives. Kaseman and Marriott executive Brad Colton both point out that faith is central to the identity of nearly every immigrant community.

As important as ensuring broad representation on the Sister City committees is the need to bring new energy to them. Many of the veterans who led us on successful trips to El Salvador and Ethiopia point out that they are involved in many different activities. Evelyn Gonzalez of the Morazán, El Salvador committee, explains that community leaders, while still interested in being involved, are spread too thin. She notes that Sister City activities require lots of time and effort and asks how we can find new, young people to help with the events. Jorge Granados who worked with Gonzalez right from the early days of the Morazán Sister City committee, agrees that the committee needs new members and new energy. He says the committees need to focus on events. Cultural exchanges are important to reactivate the energy, according to Granados. He agrees that many of the community leaders are busy with other activities, but he says "we still have the energy for Sister Cities." Perhaps the most hopeful finding from the Sister Cities survey is that nearly four in every ten respondents indicated they would definitely (19%) or probably (20%) be willing to work on a Sister Cities committee that meets as much as six times a year.

Respondents to the Sister City survey were asked their likelihood of attending four types of programs, once it is judged appropriate to schedule them. Art exhibitions (65%), history and culture seminars (60%), and concerts (57%) topped the list. Economic development sessions (45%) generated less interest.

Sister Cities International has an art contest each year – "Young Artists and Authors Showcase." In Lexington, Kentucky, a local bank sponsors the Sister Cities arts competition. One hundred or more 13 to 17 year olds compete for cash

prizes. The art is displayed for a month each year in the bank's art gallery. The Kentucky winner competes in the international contest.

Sameen Dafar of Greater Columbus Sister Cities International says that events are a gateway to travel. She says when the 276 year old Paganini Violin from their Sister City Genoa, Italy was on display at the Columbus Museum of Art, a lot of people got excited about travelling to Genoa.

Former Sister Cities International CEO Mary Kane says each Sister City program needs to find its niche. In Montgomery County, the niche that works might be the arts, according to Kane who suggests partnering with AFI (American Film Institute) on a movie festival and providing food. Or bringing performers from your Sister Cities to Strathmore. Or becoming part of the Bethesda Fine Arts Festival.

With all the options we have discovered in the last few months, virtual programming presents a wonderful opportunity to showcase the history and culture of our Sister Cities through such activities as cooking and dancing according to MSC board member Tracey-Alexis Dixon and others.

There might even be an opportunity to charge a fee for some of the activities. Martha Henry of San Antonio's International Relations Office suggests with our diversity Montgomery County could create and sell a Sister Cities Cookbook. According to Beth Weibel, Fort Worth Sister Cities charges fees for events ranging from calligraphy lessons to speakers at annual ethnic heritage events. A Japanese Children's Day in Fort Worth attracted 175 participants many of them new to the Sister Cities program (charging \$20 for adults, \$10 for youth, free for 12 and under).

**Third, the Sister Cities program needs at least one full-time dedicated staff person with administrative support.**

MSC acting board chair Mumin Barre puts it directly. Volunteers are great, he says, but the lack of a full-time staff person and the lack of dedicated funding have presented long term challenges of sustainability. Former county Asian liaison Lily Qi points out that the volunteers from Northwestern Chinese American Association of Greater Washington have other jobs. Qi said these programs take a lot of effort with language and time zone barriers. As noted above, leaders in the

Morazán, El Salvador committee point out that they have many other commitments. Clemmie Solomon, a MSC board member and retired dean at Montgomery College, received unanimous support from his board colleagues when he said the program needs a full-time staff person with an administrative assistant.

Former SCI executive Kane says a Sister Cities program needs a paid director to coordinate the paper flow, serve as the “go to” person for the Sister City committees, and keep everyone informed about what others are doing. This person must have relationships with the economic development and education sectors, according to Kane.

The Montgomery Sister Cities program was developed in the aftermath of the 2008 economic recession. As a new program in a difficult budget environment, every effort was made to minimize the need for county taxpayer dollars. As a program that involved international trips by county officials, it was especially important to avoid using taxpayer dollars. The bare bones support staff included one part-time Senior Fellow assigned to provide administrative and other support for the Montgomery Sister Cities board. The director and the ethnic liaisons from the Office of Community Partnerships staffed the Sister City committees. To avoid any claim that county staff and the County Executive were junketeering on taxpayer dollars, all, with exceptions only for a few economic development staff, paid their way on the mission trips or had their costs paid from fees paid by other travelers, and all took vacation time when they traveled.

This bare bones budgeting worked for the first two Sister Cities as the Sister Cities programs in El Salvador and Ethiopia turned out to be excellent community engagement tools for the Latino and African liaisons in the Office of Community Partnerships. When the community engagement advantage became less important and economic development more important and the next three Sister Cities all fell under the jurisdiction of the Asian liaison, the staffing structure revealed its limitations.

Despite saying we wanted to avoid having the Sister Cities program be little more than a series of wonderful international trips, we have not been able to sustain ongoing relationships with the five Sister Cities with the limited staff support available from the county government and the Montgomery Sister Cities partner.

The Office of Community Partnerships staff liaisons need to be part of the Sister Cities support team, but cannot be expected to play the time consuming roles of staffing Sister City committees and organizing mission trips required of them in the first decade of the program.

There are two distinct staff needs. First, as Montgomery College's Sanjay Rai explains, staff is needed to help the Sister City committees follow up on projects discussed on mission trips and plan and implement activities between the trips. Reemberto Rodriguez, director of the Silver Spring Region, says it bluntly – you won't get activity between trips without staff. Experience has taught us that someone needs to call the meetings and keep the group moving forward. Karla Silvestre says she saw her job as the Latino liaison to keep the Salvadoran committee on task. Salvadoran Sister City committee member Jorge Granados says in recent years the committee members have good conversations and then there is no follow up.

Second, a dedicated staff person is needed as the ringmaster to coordinate the activities of the five Sister City committees, MSC board, county government, Montgomery College, MCPS, and MCEDC. Montgomery College's Mike Mills admits that sometimes the College doesn't know with whom to connect on the county side. Reemberto Rodriguez says the ideal would be to have a half-time staff person who knows how to navigate county government operating with the authority of the County Executive.

Former MSC senior fellow Bob Levey says a successful Sister Cities program needs a part-time fundraiser, a part-time administrator, and part-time media support. Fort Worth Sister Cities International has five full-time staff members:

- President/CEO & Protocol Officer;
- Vice President & COO (HR, Finance, Procurement);
- Senior Program Manager (trip and event planning);
- Associate Director for Community Engagement (special events and marketing); and
- Exchanges & Outreach Associate (includes social media).

Councilmember Craig Rice says in an ideal budget situation, he would like to see Sister Cities get department level status by law or with a director and program manager under the Office of Community Partnerships umbrella. Put the

investment in, says Rice. Lock in the commitment by law to make it hard for the next set of elected officials to back away.

The San Antonio Sister Cities program is run out of the city's International Relations Office, a division of the city's Economic Development Department. There has never been a 501(c)(3) Sister Cities community organization in San Antonio. Chief Diplomacy and Protocol Officer Sherry Dowlatshahi heads the International Relations Office. She explains that San Antonio's Sister Cities want to deal directly with the mayor. The advantage of the city running the Sister Cities program is that it puts city government in the driver's seat. Sister City staff are considered peers by San Antonio's overseas partner cities.

Montgomery County can not afford to hire full-time staff to cover all of the skills needed for a successful Sister Cities program. It is unlikely to be able to afford creation of a Global Engagement department on the San Antonio model any time soon. But as several interviewees pointed out, there is staff capacity among the partner organizations of Montgomery College, MCPS, and MCEDC. Montgomery College board member Bob Levey recommends that the best way to get those skills is to add them to responsibilities of those doing these functions at Montgomery College or The Universities at Shady Grove. MCEDC board member Matthew Lee points out that the Montgomery County Economic Development Corporation has the basic staff infrastructure to make connections with state and federal government agencies. Karla Silvestre says the College's Office of Community Engagement that she directs has the staff to facilitate and market events.

**Fourth, financial support will need to come from county government for at least the next 18 months while the economy recovers and a case is built for partial private financing.**

Virtually everyone interviewed agreed that the Montgomery Sister Cities program should be funded by a mix of public and private dollars, and virtually no one was optimistic about the possibility of raising significant private dollars in the near term.

MSC acting board chair Mumin Barre recommended an aggressive goal for Montgomery Sister Cities would be to get to 50% county dollars and 50% private

dollars in two years. To date, other than fees paid by travelers for trip expenses, Montgomery Sister Cities has not been able to raise significant private dollars. A modest effort to sell memberships with Montgomery Sister City pins for \$20 produced less than modest results. Barre said we must develop a full range of private fundraising -- private sponsorships, small dollar fundraising, foundation grants, individual donations, and revenue from trips.

Kasey Kaseman, with decades of experience fundraising for nonprofit causes in Montgomery County, says a 50-50 split would be a major achievement years down the road. He says it would require a professional presentation of the case for private dollars. The case would need to document the value of diversity as Montgomery County's edge in the global economy bolstered by quotes from business, civic, and political leaders and from our students. The case would include embracing our essential interdependency in the post-Covid-19 world.

Montgomery College's Sanjay Rai says we need to educate corporate leaders about the value of Sister Cities and remind them how much of their business comes from ethnic communities. Former Maryland Delegate Aruna Miller says the key to clinching support from the business community will be to provide tangible and measurable results from economic development initiatives. MCEDC's Ben Wu says a business can justify contributing to support a World of Montgomery Festival for community good will. To contribute to Montgomery Sister Cities, they would need to see a direct return on investment. Wu recommends looking for companies with direct connections to the countries of the Sister Cities.

Mary Kane, former President and CEO of Sister Cities International, agrees that to gain business support you have to show value. Using data from 2014, Kane and Jay Mathur, CEO of valueideas, studied the economic benefits of Sister City relationships in the United States and their impact on the global economy ("Measures That Matter"). In 2014, Kane and Mathur catalogued 14,000 visitors to the United States from 1,100 inbound exchanges, 10,000 U.S. residents who participated in 1,000 outbound exchanges, 15,000 youth involved with local Sister City programs, 32,000 Sister City volunteers, and 1,130,000 individuals who participated in Sister City events and exchanges. In addition to the economic advantages of Sister City events and exchanges and related tourism, work needs to be done to quantify business investments and contracts that are facilitated by Sister City relationships.

Marriott executive Brad Colton recommends making the case to large corporations in Montgomery County about how support of Sister Cities would strengthen their relationships with their employees. Colton points out that Marriott hires its full range of employees including executives and housekeeping staff from Montgomery's Sister Cities. Choice, Host, Sodexo, Miller & Long, Ruppert and other landscaping companies, Clark Construction, and Lockheed Martin all do the same. Mary Kane says this is why a Sister Cities organization needs strong board members. She asks: Who is on your board and who do they know?

Fundraising need not be limited to large corporate donations. Colton, a former chair of Leadership Montgomery and faith leader, said the Sister Cities concept makes complete sense to him. He said the challenge would be to get organizations like Marriott and Leadership Montgomery and faith organizations to identify their people who might be interested. Ben Wu of MCEDC suggested starting with the Human Resources staff at these large companies.

Reemberto Rodriguez and Geraldina Dominguez recommend Rotary International as a possible source of members. Returned Peace Corps volunteers would be another group likely to resonate with the Sister Cities message. Greg Wims, a Rotary leader and founder of the Victims' Rights Foundation, agrees that Rotary Club members would be prospective donors. Peace Corps veteran Don Mooers says Sister Cities was born of the same vision that led to the creation of the Peace Corps.

Drew Powell, president of the Rockville Sister City Corporation (RSCC), reports that RSCC has approximately 200 individual and family members paying annual dues of \$20 to \$40 and about twenty corporate sponsors contributing from \$100 to \$1,000 each. Ethiopian Sister City committee member Solomon Ayele says he pays dues as a member of the Corvallis (OR) Sister Cities Association because Corvallis is a Sister City of Gondar, Ethiopia.

MSC board member Roman Santillan points out that fundraising depends upon the purpose. It was possible to raise money for a hospital and for scholarships for El Salvador, but it is hard to raise money for an abstract concept like Sister Cities. Habitat was able to raise \$500,000 to build houses in El Salvador because of its

tithe policy and fees it collects from volunteers on its mission trips. Montgomery College's Cinder Cooper Barnes recommends funding travel for students and then getting those students in front of funders. She says when students tell their stories, the value of global education will be clear. Bob Levey makes the point succinctly: have three kids from three different countries tell their stories to a funder, and you'll get tears and money.

Councilmember Gabe Albornoz makes the case for county funding of Sister Cities as a priority investment in strengthening the county's relationships with our ethnic communities. He says the trusted relationships built through Sister Cities allow the county to provide better service to our residents, reducing the need for more costly expenditures later. Albornoz says the trips he took to El Salvador demonstrated the value of working with successful business leaders here and helping them make more strategic investments in their home countries.

Councilmember Craig Rice agrees. He says if Sister Cities is a priority for county government, government funds should be there to show support. In Lexington, tourism is a partner for Sister Cities. According to Kay Sargent, the travel involved with Sister Cities' programs has demonstrated a positive economic impact for the city.

Fort Worth has demonstrated the capacity to raise money from a variety of sources. The Sister Cities organization has an annual budget of \$1,250,000. They have a five year contract with the City of Fort Worth at \$50,000 per year. They raise about \$300,000 each year from corporate sponsorships and memberships. One of its business partners does a fundraiser each year that raises \$70,000. There is a program fee of \$350 for each person who travels on one of the trips. According to Beth Weibel, the parents of youth who travel are among the greatest allies and supporters of Fort Worth Sister Cities International.

Greg Wims, who has had decades of success raising funds for community causes in Montgomery County, observes that the best way to raise money is the old-fashioned way -- get a few sponsors, set up a lunch with a speaker, show a video. Second, raise money online.

Here's the argument Greg Wims makes for Sister Cities: We live in a global economy. Montgomery County has more than one million people. So many of your employees and customers come from the countries of our Sister Cities. We

need to find peace by understanding each other. We need to pursue economic development opportunities.

The pitch in San Antonio, according to Martha Henry, is straight forward: Many people overseas have heard of Houston, Dallas, and Austin. San Antonio is not as well known. One of our goals and a way to gain support for our activities is “to elevate the city on the global stage.”

Councilmember Rice’s elevator speech for Sister Cities goes like this: We all stand to benefit from the Sister Cities program. We can take Montgomery County and the world to the next level. We can learn what it means to be global citizens. We need to connect to larger issues and have conversations beyond our borders. We need better global relationships. It starts with Sister Cities. This will benefit all of us on so many levels.

From Fort Worth Sister Cities International: “In an increasingly smaller world, Fort Worth Sister Cities plays a huge role in enhancing the image of our city abroad — helping to improve the lives of our citizens and enhance global opportunities for all. We:

- orchestrate internationally recognized inbound and outbound exchange programs;
- provide essential instruction for protocol and diplomacy;
- produce unparalleled youth and educator programs; and
- conduct trade missions to foster economic development and mutual respect.”

We should not overlook the possibility of getting grant funding from international organizations and national, state, and regional foundations. Ethiopian activist Solomon Ayele says the program should start looking for funding from Sister Cities International, USAID, and other organizations to help us help our Sister Cities respond to the Covid-19 pandemic. He says Corvallis Sister City received grant funding to help Gondar. MSC board member Clemmie Solomon recommends we need individuals with expertise to come together to work on writing a proposal to support foundation and government grants.

**Fifth, while it is unlikely we will be able to travel to our Sister Cities for at least 18 months, this time can be used productively to strengthen the MSC board, reenergize the Sister City committees, and reconnect to our Sister Cities.**

MSC acting board chair Mumin Barre argues that while the Covid-19 shutdown makes it impossible for us to organize the people-to-people exchanges that are at the heart of the Sister Cities experience, it gives us the opportunity to look inward in order to:

- strengthen the inner workings of the board and the Sister City committees;
- provide the time for each committee to develop a plan of activities for 2021;
- assess what we have accomplished and where we hope to go and strengthen our social media and public relations capacity;
- begin to develop a base of financial support through small donor fundraisers; and
- host virtual events online.

MSC board member Roman Santillan suggests a virtual World of Montgomery Festival. Councilmember Albornoz suggests a half day virtual summit focusing on the lessons we have learned through our Sister Cities work. He also proposes Face Time Live concerts that connect with our Sister Cities. Montgomery College's Mike Mills proposes virtual half day conferences for each Sister City to develop projects for when it is safe to travel.

Kasey Kaseman, the county's faith community liaison, suggests we have a rich discussion on the impact of Covid-19 across our six communities. And Montgomery College's Cinder Cooper Barnes proposes documenting with first person interviews what it is like to live through Covid-19 here and in our Sister Cities.

Habitat's John Paukstis reminds us food connects people. He proposes a virtual cooking lesson on how to make pupusas from the El Barrial village where Habitat built homes.

Montgomery College's Karla Silvestre notes that we have made many strides in the use of technology since the Covid-19 shutdown. We should use some of what

has been learned even as things get back toward normal. She remembers in the early years when the Gandhi Brigade youth skyped with youth in El Salvador. Silvestre says the virtual Sister City projects might provide an opportunity for the College to jump start aspects of its global education program. Silver Spring Region director Reemberto Rodriguez says some of the Town Hall meetings held on Zoom in recent months have been as good or better than in person meetings. Habitat's Sarah Reddinger reports more people are showing up for virtual homeowner association meetings than had attended in person meetings. Greg Wims says they are getting great attendance at Rotary meetings.

On June 18, 2020, Karla Silvestre, Montgomery College's Community Engagement director, convened staff members from Montgomery College Television (MCTV) for a conversation about possible virtual programming about Sister Cities with Cara Lesser, founder and executive director of KID Museum (KID), and me. Most of the participants had been part of the team that organized the World of Montgomery Festivals at Montgomery College in recent years. Everyone agrees that the last few months have taught us a lot about the opportunity to connect virtually. Melissa Pace, managing director of MCTV, says Sister City programming aligns with the mission of MCTV and the College. Cara Lesser says that KID values its partnership with Montgomery College and that Sister Cities programming fits with the work KID is doing.

The MCTV staff explained how it uses a variety of platforms to produce prerecorded cable programming and combine it with Facebook Live to allow for viewer participation. The group imagined the possibility of a series of programs that highlight the different cultures of Montgomery's Sister Cities. MCTV has significant video interviews and performances from the World of Montgomery Festivals that could be used in these programs. MCTV staff say they have had lots of success with programs of about 30 minutes in length. Thirty minute programs could attempt to capture multiple aspects of the immigrant experience here in Montgomery as well as the cultures of our Sister Cities. Or there could be a series of short videos showcasing food, arts, and small business owners. The videos could be archived on YouTube as a bank of content designed for those interested in enhancing their cultural competence. MCTV could create a Sister Cities page.

Cara Lesser says KID has learned that virtual programming needs to be hyper focused on the intended audience. Different audiences gravitate to different

platforms. If you want to reach a youth audience, for example, you would not use Facebook Live. Joe Thompson of MCTV reports that parents and older relatives were more likely to watch the Montgomery College commencement on Facebook while the graduates and their friends were more likely to watch it on YouTube. Melissa Pace says seniors were more likely to view the graduation on cable.

Pace says in planning for this programming, we should start with the content. Lesser agrees that we need to determine our objectives as the content and the audience will dictate the platform. Our World of Montgomery Festival was focused on helping middle and high school students become global citizens. Pace confirmed the College is very committed to reach that audience. Lesser says KID is hard at work reimagining its presentations of youth voices around the social justice issues we face.

Our Sister Cities survey tested respondents interest in a variety of virtual programming options. Virtual trips to one or more of the five Sister Cities received the most positive response with 62% saying they would definitely or probably be interested in attending or participating if these events were held virtually using Zoom or some similar technology. A virtual Town Hall about the future of the Montgomery Sister Cities program gathered 56% support followed by a virtual World of Montgomery Festival (51%), and a virtual Summit with leaders from Montgomery County and all five Sister Cities (50%). While this survey should not be dispositive, it does support the comments I received during the interviews and the meeting with Montgomery College Television staff. Councilmember Rice, in a view shared by others, says a virtual festival would have a quite different feel from an in-person festival. Delegate Lily Qi warns that trying to do a virtual summit with all five Sister Cities would be a logistical nightmare with language and time zone challenges that would make it more likely to fail than succeed.

I interviewed representatives from two of our Sister City committees after meeting with MCTV staff. Their response to the ideas generated by the MCTV staff was quite positive. Hui Li and Sabrina Lei, both former presidents of the Northwestern Chinese American Association of Greater Washington (NCAAGW) that serves as the Sister City committee for Xi'an, China, recommend a program to show what life is like for people from Xi'an who have come to Montgomery County. Food, music, and tai chi were all mentioned as possible subjects. Hui Li emphasizes not to limit the programs to cultural issues.

Darwin Romero of the Morazán, El Salvador Sister City committee proposes highlighting contributions of the Salvadoran community here in Montgomery County. Show us to the whole community, says Romero. This will be valuable exposure for Montgomery Sister Cities. Nestor Alvarenga says Telemundo has not partnered with MCTV but would be open to doing so. Telemundo talent could moderate. MSC board member Roman Santillan works for Montgomery County Public Libraries. He says these programs could include the people in Morazán. He recently helped organize a virtual program from Mexico.

Former Maryland Delegate Aruna Miller embraces the idea of virtual Sister City programming, but warns against moving too quickly. Miller suggests starting with one program with the strongest Sister City. She says not to commit to five at once. Get it right. Plan carefully. Script it. Test it. Practice. Don't let it become amateur hour. Partnering with Montgomery College Television will ensure the level of planning and professionalism Miller proposes.

MCPS Deputy Superintendent Monifa McKnight cautions that MCPS has learned that not everyone on the other side of our virtual learning has what they need to participate and make it a meaningful experience for all. Equity demands that we ask "what do you need?" MCPS has learned that we must be continually checking in with our students to make sure they are all equipped to learn. McKnight says the same equity questions must be asked in the Sister Cities context: What do our Sister Cities need to be able to participate? She suggests that in some cases Montgomery County will need to provide the technology resources necessary to support participation of our Sister Cities.

## **Recommendations:**

### **Mission, MSC Board, Sister City Committees, & Staffing**

Recognizing that this report is just the first step in a process, the recommendations I propose below are designed to get the discussion about the future of Montgomery Sister Cities moving forward.

#### **Overview**

The mission of Montgomery Sister Cities is purposely broad and inclusive:

*Montgomery Sister Cities, Inc. was established to connect Montgomery County to the world by encouraging and fostering friendship, partnership, and mutual cooperation through educational, cultural, social, economic, humanitarian, and charitable exchanges between the people of Montgomery County and people from various nations around the world.*  
(from the MSC website – see Attachment One on page 53)

Mary Kane, former President and CEO of Sister Cities International, made an excellent suggestion that the mission statement be put in the active voice:

*Montgomery Sister Cities, Inc. connects Montgomery County to the world...*

The interviews with stakeholders reveal strong support for the broad objectives of the Montgomery Sister Cities mission statement. Montgomery County has been able to secure Sister City agreements with an impressive group of cities with rich historic and cultural roots from the countries that have produced our largest immigrant populations. Tangible benefits from community engagement to economic development have resulted. That said, partisans of the Sister Cities concept are clear-eyed about obvious shortcomings of the Montgomery Sister Cities program. To justify the continued commitment of time and resources to the Sister Cities program, it is imperative that steps be taken to strengthen and reenergize the program.

One could argue that this is the worst possible time to undertake an effort to strengthen a Sister Cities program, but in fact it might be the best. The major strength of the Montgomery Sister Cities program has been the mission trips to the Sister Cities. The weakness has been the lack of follow-up after the trips and the failure to develop a robust schedule of activities between the mission trips. Montgomery Sister Cities needs to build a much stronger structural foundation of board, partners, staff, and volunteers to sustain the valued people-to-people relationships through inevitable political, economic, and cultural change. The Covid-19 lockdown that prevents international trips provides the time and space to focus internally and build that needed foundation.

A number of those interviewed made the case that this work is more important now than ever. MSC board member and retired Johns Hopkins University

administrator Nick Arrindell says as an organization committed to building cultural understanding, Montgomery Sister Cities should be at the center of rebuilding community in Montgomery County's post-pandemic world. Montgomery College's Sanjay Rai cites CNN's Fareed Zakaria's concern that the pandemic could isolate the United States from the world. Faith community liaison Kasey Kaseman says now is the time to embrace our essential interdependency and recognize that we are one human family. Former Maryland Delegate Aruna Miller observes that the federal government's failures in international diplomacy provide us with an important opportunity to foster citizen diplomacy and make Montgomery County a prime destination for international businesses and foreign investors.

The Sister Cities survey gave respondents an opportunity to share their views of the importance of the Sister City program in a time of a global health pandemic. Respondents read the following statement and were asked to choose which of two reactions better reflects their attitude: *We are currently experiencing a global health pandemic and economic crisis. Our county budget is under stress.* Not surprisingly, the sample is sharply divided over the desirability of making the Sister Cities program a priority in the current environment where funding for virtually all programs will be reduced. Roughly equal numbers of respondents selected each reaction:

- 47% chose: *We need to focus on other priorities right now.*
- 53% chose: *We need programs like Sister Cities now more than ever to rebuild global understanding and cooperation.*

The Sister Cities survey also gave respondents an opportunity to share their views on the key elements of the Sister Cities program. Respondents were asked to rank five goals of the program in terms of their relative importance. The rankings for the goals were converted into scores, with goals scoring higher perceived as more important. The results:

1. Creating a welcoming environment - broadening our understanding of cultures from other countries represented in Montgomery County. **Score: 691**
2. Community engagement - developing relationships with underrepresented and underserved ethnic and faith communities in the county. **Score: 673**

3. Economic development - providing economic development opportunities for Montgomery County businesses and bringing new businesses here from Sister Cities countries. **Score: 576**
4. Humanitarian projects - fostering local involvement in efforts helping people living in our Sister Cities. **Score: 568**
5. Preparing global citizens for the future - promoting trips for local young people to broaden their skills and help them thrive in the globalized world. **Score: 562**

Again, not surprisingly, the two major goals of the program during its first decade -- *creating a welcoming environment* and *community engagement* -- came out on top moderately outdistancing the other three. In answer to another question, respondents said that *participating in a humanitarian service project* and *learning about a new culture* would be the main reasons for joining a Sister Cities trip. I read the survey to support the continued inclusion of all five goals in the Montgomery Sister Cities program.

Before getting to specific recommendations, there is one other macro issue to consider. The Albuquerque and San Antonio Sister City programs illustrate the issue. The Albuquerque Sister Cities Foundation is an all-volunteer run 501(c)3 organization with modest support provided by an annual contract with the city. It appears to be a model of what President Eisenhower envisioned when he proposed a people-to-people Sister City program at the 1956 White House Conference on Citizen Diplomacy. The San Antonio program, in contrast, has no volunteer led community nonprofit. San Antonio's Sister City program is a city staff run operation out of the International Relations Office that is part of the city's Economic Development Department.

Former Sister Cities International CEO Mary Kane explains that most countries aren't like the United States. To get things done, relationships have to be peer-to-peer. In most countries, Kane recognizes, that means government-to-government. In some countries, the government is the only player in the Sister City relationship.

Albuquerque's Richard Buckler acknowledges the priority of his city's Sister Cities is to meet his city's elected officials. San Antonio's Sherry Dowlatshahi says flatly she sometimes doesn't get respect until it is made clear she works for the mayor.

While it is obvious that the citizen diplomacy envisioned by Eisenhower is unrealistic in many situations in the modern world, Albuquerque's Buckler argues that when they are able to find the right counterparts in the Sister Cities, citizen diplomacy strengthens the organizations on both sides of the relationship. The mayors pay attention to their citizens who are engaged in this work, according to Buckler. We need strong relationships between the government representatives and their citizens, he says.

Recognizing the virtues of both approaches, I believe Montgomery County has created the proper structure with a 501(c)(3) volunteer led community organization working closely with the county's elected leadership and in partnership with important educational, cultural, humanitarian, and economic development entities. The challenge now is to strengthen all the parts and get them working collaboratively so the whole is greater than or better than the sum of its parts.

### **Montgomery Sister Cities: Board of Directors**

First, the MSC Board of Directors needs to be more representative of the Montgomery County's diversity and needs active participation from representatives of all the Sister City committees and from major stakeholder partner organizations. Former Delegate Aruna Miller was most outspoken about the need to overhaul the makeup of the current Montgomery Sister Cities board and to make sure the membership of the board is fully reflective of the diversity of the county. She recommends a gender balanced board and that it include a female and male representative from each of the five Sister Cities. She recommends the board include a female student and a male student. In addition, the board needs to add representation from business, education, and faith communities.

As a first step, the MSC board should activate the nominating committee and charge the committee with presenting a slate of additional board members with a goal of having a much more representative board before the end of 2020. This exercise should include use of a nonprofit board recruitment tool to identify holes and strengthening of the existing MSC description of board responsibilities.

Former SCI CEO Mary Kane says the most significant advice she can give is the importance of having strong members on the board who have the capacity to see the big picture. A board needs people who can attract other people and attract funders. Albuquerque's Richard Buckler says his organization knows it needs to do a better job of identifying future leaders for its organization. They are focused on recruiting young entrepreneurs for their board.

Lexington, Kentucky Sister Cities is governed by a commission appointed by the mayor that includes representatives of major stakeholders including the University of Kentucky, city school system, arts and culture, tourism, business, and the mayor's office. Montgomery Sister Cities would be well served by having representatives of Montgomery College, MCPS, county government, and the Montgomery County Economic Development Corporation as a means of ensuring two-way communication. Salvadoran activist Evelyn Gonzalez points out that the Morazán Sister City committee's efforts to strengthen higher education in Morazán would have benefitted from having representatives from Montgomery College and MCPS on the MSC board and available to provide advice and support in dealing with El Salvador's Department of Education and the University of El Salvador.

Second, the MSC board must play a much stronger role in providing guidance to the five Sister City committees and begin by convening a meeting of all members of the committees to discuss expectations. Yes, the people-to-people relationships and activities that go to the heart of any Sister Cities program are best organized by the committees of the Sister Cities. But the essentially hands-off approach of the board has not served the organization well.

With representatives of each of the five Sister Cities serving on the board, the board should establish standards of accountability. These standards should include: active service of committee representatives on the board, reports of activities from each committee at every board meeting, and an annual plan of activities with a proposed budget.

To ensure accountability, the board must commit to put any Sister City committee that fails to comply on inactive status. SCI has rules requiring notification when a Sister City relationship has been placed in emeritus status or terminated. Emeritus

status would seem more desirable as termination would likely be misunderstood by those who had emigrated from the Sister City and others.

Montgomery College's Karla Silvestre, business executive Matthew Lee, former Maryland Delegate Aruna Miller, and others recommend the MSC board bring the five Sister City committees together one or more times per year to share best practices and ideas for activities. Leda Cristina Hernandez of the Morazán, El Salvador Sister City says the MCS board should see what we are doing and we should share ideas. In Columbus, Ohio, the chairs of the five Sister Cities committees meet with each other and with staff four times a year. They share best practices and help each other.

In Albuquerque, all of the Sister City leadership gets together three times each year. There is an annual meeting in June and a holiday party in December. Each January, Albuquerque Sister Cities Foundation hosts an international cookie and tea event that attracts 100 or more people to sample international fare from all ten of our Sister Cities.

Sabrina Lei of NCAAGW's Xi'an, China Sister City committee points out that when there were regular meetings of the Montgomery Sister Cities board, the committee responded to requests from the board. Once the MSC board met less frequently and made fewer requests, according to Lei, the Xi'an committee stopped meeting.

As noted above, Salvadoran activist Evelyn Gonzalez says the MSC board needs to be more involved in supporting the Sister City committees and helping them get the resources they need.

Third, the MSC board needs to develop a public relations and marketing plan to lift the visibility of the organization. Montgomery College's Sanjay Rai points out that we have a great program but that too few people know about it. The board needs to address the questions Rai asks: How do we expose others to this? How do we educate and engage others so they see the value of being involved? Delegate Miller was particularly animated about the need for a marketing/public relations plan that must include a dramatic improvement to the outdated website. Sameen Dafar of Greater Columbus Sister Cities says they partner with

the city and with museums to increase their visibility and gain new media contacts.

Councilmember Alborno emphasizes the importance of reaching millennials. Several Sister city organizations that admitted difficulty in attracting millennials to travel on Sister City trips because of job conflicts say they try to develop activities aimed specifically at millennials.

Even beyond our immigrant community, Montgomery County is unusually rich with people with deep international connections. The challenge is to find them and get them to see how Sister Cities connects to their global passions. Returned Peace Corps volunteer Don Mooers says we are literally sitting on top of the globe. Sister Cities should be used as a launch pad to get more people in Montgomery County to learn how they can help their neighbors here by learning about the countries they came from through travel. At one point, Takoma Park and Silver Spring had the highest concentration of Returned Peace Corps Volunteers in the country, according to Mooers. The way to reach them is to explain Sister Cities and to connect what Sister Cities does to their experience in the Peace Corps.

Mooers points out that the Washington area is full of people who have worked in U.S. embassies around the world, USAID, World Bank, International Monetary Fund, United Nations, Inter-American Development Bank, Organization of American States, and on and on. The World Bank, for example, has an alumni group. Again, the best way to reach them is to explain Sister Cities and to connect what Sister Cities does to their experiences.

Greg Wims, former regional Governor for Rotary notes there are eight Rotary clubs in Montgomery County. In addition to dues paid to Rotary International, each club spends about 75% of its funds on local community service projects and 25% on international service projects. Members recommend grants. There are also global grants where Rotary International will match local dollars for \$50-60,000 projects. Wims recommends outreach to Rotary and similar service organizations.

Marriott executive Brad Colton, a former chair of Leadership Montgomery and faith leader, says the outreach challenge is to get organizations like Marriott and

Leadership Montgomery and faith organizations to identify their people who might be interested.

Fourth, the MSC board needs to develop a comprehensive plan for raising private dollars to support the program. MSC acting board chair Mumin Barre recommends an ambitious goal of matching county taxpayer support of the program with private dollars in two years. While no one believes that is anywhere near possible in today's environment, it is time to begin work on developing the case for private fundraising and exploring the full range of private fundraising options — private sponsorships, small dollar fundraising, foundation grants, individual donations, and revenue from trips. Many Sister City organizations have membership fees for individuals, families, and businesses similar to those of the Rockville Sister City Corporation.

A nonprofit board best practice is to require board members to make an annual donation, but Morazán, El Salvador committee member Evelyn Gonzalez points out that can be a disincentive for some to agree to serve as they might rather contribute directly to services in the home country.

### **Montgomery Sister Cities: Sister City Committees**

First, with guidance from the MSC board, each of the five Sister City committees needs to focus on broadening representation and participation. All five of the Sister City committees need new members and fresh ideas. Perhaps the most hopeful finding from the Sister Cities survey is that nearly four in every ten respondents indicated they would definitely (19%) or probably (20%) be willing to work on a Sister Cities committee that meets as much as six times a year. In addition, the fact that approximately three-quarters of the sample chose to answer an optional, open-ended question about what would make you want to travel on a Sister City trip indicates strong potential interest in Sister Cities mission trips and provides a rich source of information to those working to strengthen the Sister Cities program.

The India and South Korea committees need to restart from scratch to build strong, broad, and sustainable memberships. All the committees should seek gender balance and representation from members from diverse backgrounds. Mumin Barre recommends the board make sure each Sister City committee has

representatives from business and education. Cinder Cooper Barnes, director of Montgomery College's Global Humanities Institute, recommends adding students and faculty from the college to the committees. Kasey Kaseman and Councilmember Albornoz both recommend greater participation from faith community representatives.

Mary Kane points out that there are two things that happen that can kill the energy of Sister City committees. A Sister Cities committee often has a single champion. When the champion moves on for whatever reason, the Sister City committee often dies. Another concern is that the committees can become like little clubs content to talk and not to accomplish much. A constant flow of new people with fresh ideas can help prevent these things from happening.

Montgomery County, in part because our Sister Cities program is only twelve years old and in part because of the extraordinary diversity of our population, has the distinct advantage of having many residents who come from each of our Sister Cities. This is not true of most Sister City committees across the country. Our five Sister Cities are in the five countries of origin with the county's largest immigrant populations. This advantage presents a special challenge as some Sister City advocates believe the Sister City committees should be made up exclusively of people from the country of the Sister City while others argue that the full potential of the Sister City relationship can only be realized by inviting participation from the entire Montgomery County community.

Two of the leaders of our Gondar, Ethiopia Sister City committee hold these diametrically opposed positions. Former MSC board member Solomon Ayele says all the committees will be stronger if they have representation from outside the ethnicity of the Sister City. But his colleague on the Gondar, Ethiopia committee, Solomon Teklai, strongly disagrees. Teklai argues that an independent hometown association with its own 501(c)(3) should be established to be in charge of the Sister City relationship and select members for the MSC board.

The mission of Montgomery Sister Cities is "encouraging and fostering friendship, partnership, and mutual cooperation through educational, cultural, social, economic, humanitarian, and charitable exchanges between the people of Montgomery County and people from various nations around the world." It seems clear to me that while Sister City committees certainly should be led by

immigrants from our Sister Cities, they should welcome participation by others. Our Xi'an, China Sister City actually is a pre-existing 501(c)(3) hometown association -- Northwestern Chinese American Association of Greater Washington (NCAAGW) -- as Solomon Teklai has proposed, but when I put this question to the leadership of NCAAGW, they unanimously said they would welcome people from other backgrounds to their Sister City work.

Second, with guidance from the MSC board, each of the five Sister Cities needs to develop operating procedures for ensuring basic accountability to the board and to the public. These operating procedures should require regular meetings, full attendance, regular reporting and an annual report to the MSC board, and minutes available to the public.

Leda Cristina Hernandez of the Morazán, El Salvador committee lays it out directly: We need to meet on a regular basis. We need a strategic plan. We need a fundraising plan. And we need to work with the county. I want to know what the other Sister Cities are doing. Let's identify crossover projects. Let's share knowledge and experiences.

Third, each of the five Sister City committees should provide two members to serve on the MSB board.

The three Sister City committees I met with supported the idea of having two representatives on the Montgomery Sister Cities board. It was suggested that each committee have an alternate in case one of the two is unable to attend.

The question raised above is whether these board members would be selected by the MSC board or by the Sister City committee or by the committee with approval by the board.

Fort Worth has an Exchanges & Outreach Committee made up of the Sister City Committee Chairs and chaired by a former Fort Worth Assistant City Manager. The nominating committee of the board nominates Sister City Committee Chairs to serve for two years while they serve as members of the board. The Sister City Committee Chairs are responsible for recruiting volunteers to serve on their committees and for organizing two public events each year. They assist with activities for inbound trips including finding host families for our visitors.

In Albuquerque, the chair of each Sister City committee serves on the board. As an incentive, each chair is reimbursed for one trip to their Sister City every few years if they lead a delegation of six or more.

Fourth, each of the five Sister Cities should submit an annual plan to the MSC board committing to keep in touch with its Sister City and to organize a minimum of two public events each year. These activities could include economic development forums, cultural presentations, cooking classes, or concerts. The goal is to ensure that the members of each committee are working in collaboration and providing regular opportunities for people-to-people exchanges. The Montgomery College Television programs discussed above should be part of the annual plan.

Councilmember Rice recommends quarterly check-ins with our Sister Cities as an excellent way to track progress on issues like agriculture and water and sewer infrastructure in Ethiopia, for example. These check-ins would be especially valuable in the case of turnover of political leadership.

### **Staffing the Sister Cities Program**

There is a clear consensus that the Sister Cities program needs dedicated staff with most recommending one full-time staff person with administrative support. Everyone agrees that the bare bones staffing approach of the program's first decade with one part-time senior fellow supporting MSC and the liaisons of the Office of Community Partnerships supporting the individual Sister City committees has not worked and has placed an undue burden on the OCP staff liaisons.

The problem with the consensus view is that it is not adequate. Much more needs to be done than one person could possibly do, and the assortment of skills required are much more varied than any one person is likely to have. The problem with suggesting one staff person is not enough is that the county faces enormous budget challenges for at least the next several years.

The solution might be the creation of a Global Engagement Coordinating Council with the single Sister Cities staffer serving as the connector in a role not unlike an

orchestra conductor. The council would be made up of representatives from the major Sister City partners – Montgomery Sister Cities Board, Montgomery County Executive, Montgomery County Council, Montgomery College, Montgomery Public Schools, The Universities at Shady Grove, KID Museum, and the Montgomery County Economic Development Corporation.

As several interviewees pointed out, there is staff capacity among the partner organizations. Former MSC senior fellow Bob Levey says a successful Sister Cities program needs a part-time fundraiser, a part-time administrator, and part-time media support. Levey recommends the best way to get those skills is to add it to responsibilities of those doing these functions at Montgomery College or The Universities at Shady Grove. MCEDC board member Matthew Lee points out that the Montgomery County Economic Development Corporation has a basic staff infrastructure with relevant skills. Karla Silvestre says the College's Office of Community Engagement she directs has the staff to facilitate and market events.

If each partner would agree to release some time of staff to contribute needed expertise to support the Sister Cities program, it would be the job of the Council's executive director to know who is doing what in each organization and work to ensure communication and collaboration. The council's executive director would be responsible for monitoring follow-up on promises made and keeping the Sister City committees on track. Perhaps the whole could be better than the sum of its parts with all partner organizations benefitting from this efficient sharing of resources.

MCEDC's Ben Wu says he preaches to his staff the importance of collaborating with partners to strengthen what MCEDC does and to obtain the full value that comes from working together. But Councilmember Rice questions whether this collaborative staffing model would really be efficient. If I work for the College, Rice suggests, I will respond to what I am told by my supervisors at the College.

One other important staffing need can be put on hold for now. Once it is appropriate to travel again in 2022 and beyond, it will be essential to hire a staff person expert in planning mission trips. This is the best practice among Sister City organizations and superior to Montgomery County's practice of burdening the ethnic liaisons of the Office of Community Partnerships with this task. Much will

have to happen on the health and budget fronts before this position will be needed.

## **Recommended Programs & Activities: 2020 & 2021**

The remainder of 2020 should be devoted to building a strong organizational foundation starting with a more representative Montgomery Sister Cities Board of Directors, reenergized Sister City committees, and discussions among the Sister City partners about the best way to strengthen and deepen the Sister City program as a means of advancing community engagement, global education, cultural understanding, humanitarian assistance, and economic development.

### July-September 2020

- Nominating committee of the Board of Directors of Montgomery Sister Cities should recommend a slate of new board members designed to make the board fully reflective of the county's diversity with a goal of having a much more representative board before the end of 2020.
- MSC board members, staff of the county's Office of Community Partnerships, and former members of the Sister City committees should identify prospective members for Sister City committees with meetings to start in October 2020 (July-September);
- County's Office of Community Partnerships, College's Office of Community Engagement, Montgomery College Television, and the KID Museum should begin planning virtual Sister City programming in collaboration with the Sister City committees (July-September);
- County Executive should establish a Global Engagement Coordinating Council with representation from Montgomery Sister Cities, Montgomery County Council, Montgomery College, Montgomery Public Schools, The Universities at Shady Grove, KID Museum, and the Montgomery County Economic Development Corporation and invite them to a roundtable discussion of how best to advance the goals of Sister Cities and global engagement through collaboration that strengthens each partner organization (September invitation for October or November meeting).

### October-December 2020

- Once the new members of the MSC board are seated, the board should hold a half day retreat to: (i) review the original mission statement and objectives of the organization to determine if change is needed; (ii) establish standards of accountability for the Sister City committees and plan for an early 2021 half day retreat of all members of all five committees to discuss expectations and proposed activities; (iii) begin work to develop a public relations and marketing plan to lift the visibility of the organization; and (iv) begin work on developing a comprehensive plan for raising private dollars to support the organization (November);
- Montgomery Sister Cities should update the website and produce the first of a series of quarterly online newsletters (October-December);
- Sister City committees should: (i) develop operating procedures for ensuring basic accountability to the board and to the public; (ii) select one male and one female member to serve as their representatives to the MSB board; (iii) connect with the leadership of their Sister City about future expectations; and (iv) submit an annual plan in December to the MSC board committing to organize a minimum of two public events in 2021 (October-December);
- MCPS staff from the academic side and the community engagement side should meet with county government staff and representatives of the Montgomery Sister Cities program to map out a vision for Sister Schools that includes updated policies and procedures regarding travel in light of the Covid-19 experience (October);
- County Executive should convene the Global Engagement Coordinating Council for a roundtable discussion with partner organizations of how best to advance the goals of Sister Cities and global engagement through collaboration that strengthens each partner organization (October or November);
- Montgomery College Television produce a pilot Sister City program in collaboration with one of the Sister City committees and KID Museum (November).

#### January-June 2021

- Montgomery Sister Cities should launch a low dollar membership program for individuals, families, and organizations in conjunction with a broad

- based social media campaign designed to raise the profile of Montgomery Sister Cities among county residents (January);
- Montgomery Sister Cities Board of Directors should convene all members of Sister City committees to discuss progress and share best practices (February);
- County Executive should convene the Global Engagement Coordinating Council for a follow-up roundtable discussion with the leaders and top staff of all the Sister City partner organizations to discuss collaboration efforts to date to advance the goals of Sister Cities and global engagement and a possible mission trip in November 2021 (February);
- Each Sister City committee should hold a virtual trip to its Sister City and one other virtual event in collaboration with Montgomery College Television and KID Museum (*e.g.*, economic development forum, cultural presentation, cooking class, or concert); (one each month February through June);
- Board of Education should adopt a vision for Sister Schools for 2021-2022 school year (May);
- Montgomery Sister Cities should launch a campaign for corporate sponsorships (June).

#### July-December 2021

- Each Sister City committee should convene a virtual meeting with its Sister City and hold a virtual event (*e.g.*, economic development forum, cultural presentation, cooking class, or concert); (July-December);
- County Executive should convene the Global Engagement Coordinating Council for a follow-up roundtable discussion with the leaders and top staff of all the Sister City partner organizations to discuss collaboration efforts to date to advance the goals of Sister Cities and global engagement and a possible mission trip in November 2021 (September);
- Montgomery Sister Cities Board of Directors should convene all members of Sister City committees to discuss progress and share best practices (October);
- MCPS and Montgomery Sister Cities should identify a Sister School in each Sister City (October-December);

- Possible World of Montgomery Festival produced in collaboration with Montgomery College Television and KID Museum featuring the five Sister Cities (November);
- Possible mission trip (November);
- Each Sister City committee should submit an annual report to Montgomery Sister Cities Board of Directors committing to organize a minimum of two public events in 2022 (December).

## **Attachment One: Mission of Montgomery Sister Cities**

People have come to Montgomery County, Maryland from every corner of the globe. Montgomery Sister Cities, Inc. was established to connect Montgomery County to the world by encouraging and fostering friendship, partnership, and mutual cooperation through educational, cultural, social, economic, humanitarian, and charitable exchanges between the people of Montgomery County and people from various nations around the world.

The organization's objectives include:

- (a) Encouraging the people of Montgomery County, Maryland and the people of similar communities in other nations to acquire information about each other and to understand one another as individuals, as members of their community, as citizens of their country, and as part of the family of nations.
- (b) As a consequence of such knowledge and information, fostering a continuing relationship of mutual concern between the people of Montgomery County, Maryland and the people of similar communities in other nations.
- (c) Undertaking activities and programs as well as providing the appropriate cooperation, assistance, education, and mutual understanding between Montgomery County and similar communities in other nations.
- (d) Participating as an organization in the promoting, fostering, and publicizing of local, state, and national programs of international cooperation.

(Preamble from Montgomery Sister Cities website. Objectives from Bylaws of Montgomery Sister Cities, Inc.)

## **Attachment Two: Montgomery Sister Cities Interviews**

- **Marc Elrich**, Montgomery County Executive (March 17, 2020);
- **Montgomery Sister Cities (MSC) Board Members** (April 7, 2020);
- **Mumin Barre**, Acting Chair, MSC Board (April 20, 2020);
- **Sanjay Rai**, Senior Vice President, Academic Affairs, Montgomery College; Board Member, Montgomery County Economic Development Corporation (April 20, 2020);
- **Gabe Alborno**, Montgomery County Councilmember (April 22, 2020);
- **Mike Mills**, Vice President, E-Learning, Innovation, & Teaching Excellence, Montgomery College (April 24, 2020);
- **Mansfield (Kasey) Kaseman**, Interfaith Community Liaison, Office of Community Partnerships (April 28, 2020);
- **Cinder Cooper Barnes**, Director, Global Humanities Institute, Montgomery College (April 29, 2020);
- **Bob Levey**, former Senior Fellow, Montgomery Sister Cities; Member, Montgomery College Board of Trustees (April 28, 2020);
- **Jorge Granados**, Morazán, El Salvador Committee (April 28, 2020);
- **Matthew Lee**, Founder/President & CEO, FASTech, Inc.; Board Member, Montgomery County Economic Development Corporation (May 1, 2020);
- **Karla Silvestre**, Member, Board of Education (MCPS); Community Engagement Director, Montgomery College (MC); Former Latino Liaison, Office of Community Partnerships (OCP) (May 1, 2020);
- **Lily Qi**, Member, Maryland House of Delegates; Former Assistant CAO (Economic Development), Montgomery County; Former Asian Liaison, Office of Community Partnerships (OCP) (May 1, 2020);
- **Reemberto Rodriguez**, Director, Silver Spring Region and **Geraldina Dominguez**, Director of AIDS Malignancy Program, National Cancer Institute of the National Institutes of Health (May 2, 2020);
- **Sharon Ledner**, Chief of Staff, Councilmember Rice (May 3, 2020);
- **John Paukstis**, President & CEO, Habitat for Humanity Metro Maryland; and **Sarah Reddinger**, Director of Program Services, Habitat for Humanity Metro Maryland (May 4, 2020);
- **Drew Powell**, President, Rockville Sister City Corporation (May 5, 2020);

- **Solomon Ayele**, Former Chair, Gondar Ethiopia Committee; Former Board Member, Montgomery Sister Cities (May 5, 2020);
- **Brad Colton**, Strategic Projects, Global Procurement, Marriott International; Past Chair, Leadership Montgomery (May 6, 2020);
- **Monifa McKnight**, Deputy Superintendent, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) (May 6, 2020);
- **Aruna Miller**, Former Member, Maryland House of Delegates (May 7, 2020);
- **Eunmee Shim**, President of Fort Washington Medical Center, Adventist HealthCare (May 20, 2020);
- **George Leventhal**, Director, Community Health, Kaiser Permanente; Former Montgomery County Councilmember (May 21, 2020);



- **Montgomery Sister Cities (MSC) Board Members** (April 7, 2020 and June 10, 2020);
- **Ben Wu**, President and CEO, Montgomery County Economic Development Corporation (MCEDC); Former Deputy Secretary, State of Maryland Department of Commerce; and Former U.S. Deputy Under Secretary of Commerce (June 11, 2020);
- **Craig Rice**, County Councilmember (June 15, 2020);
- **Gondar, Ethiopian Sister City Committee Members** (June 15, 2020);
- **Don Mooers**, Founder, Mooers Immigration; Former Peace Corps Regional Director; Former Peace Corps Volunteer in Sierra Leone (June 16, 2020);
- **Greg Wims**, Former Governor, Rotary District 7620, Central Maryland and Washington, DC; Former President, Maryland and Montgomery County Chapters of NAACP; Founder, Victims' Rights Foundation (June 17, 2020);
- **Jayne Staley**, Executive Director, Greater Columbus Sister Cities International and **Sameen Dafar**, Program Manager, Greater Columbus Sister Cities International (June 17, 2020);
- **Beth Weibel**, Senior Program Manager, Fort Worth Sister Cities International (June 17, 2020);
- **Kay Sargent**, Executive Director, Lexington Sister Cities Commission (June 19, 2020);

- **Sherry Dowlatshahi**, Chief Diplomacy and Protocol Officer & Head of International Relations Office; and **Martha Henry**, International Relations Manager, International Relations Office; City of San Antonio, Texas (June 19, 2020);
- **Mary Kane**, Director, National Museum of American Diplomacy; Former President and CEO, Sister Cities International; Former Secretary of State, State of Maryland (June 22, 2020);
- **Richard Buckler**, Treasurer and Former President, Albuquerque Sister Cities Foundation (June 23, 2020);
- **Northwestern Chinese American Association of Greater Washington - Xi'an, China Sister City Committee Members** (June 24, 2020); and
- **Morazán, El Salvadoran Sister City Committee Members** (June 25, 2020).

## **Attachment Three: Executive Summary of Survey Results**

Montgomery Sister Cities was established in 2009 as a community nonprofit to serve as partner to the county government to advance the Sister City program. In its first decade under the leadership of Montgomery Sister Cities and County Executive Ike Leggett, Montgomery County established Sister City relationships in the five countries of origin with the county's largest immigrant populations:

- Morazán, El Salvador;
- Gondar, Ethiopia;
- Xi'an, China;
- Hyderabad, India; and
- Daejeon, South Korea.

County Executive Marc Elrich and Office of Community Partnerships (OCP) director Diane Vu are committed to strengthening and keeping each of our Sister City relationships as a means of advancing community engagement, cultural understanding, and economic development. They commissioned Bruce Adams, former Councilmember and former Office of Community Partnerships director, to study what is working and what can be improved to strengthen Montgomery County's Sister Cities program.

As part of this study, an online survey was conducted May 27 to June 3, 2020 with recipients of OCP's newsletter. The survey invitation was sent to approximately 3,100 persons, including a small number of others not on the list but who had expressed interest in the Sister Cities program — an audience predisposed to favor efforts to showcase Montgomery County's diversity. The survey instructed people to assume when answering that current pandemic restrictions on in-person interactions are temporary and that normal Sister City activities would resume. The emailed invitation generated 228 usable responses.

Montgomery Sister Cities is grateful to Sid Groeneman, a public opinion and marketing research professional who volunteered his services to develop and implement the survey; also, to Nazaret Berhane for her assistance in helping compile the names and email addresses for the sample.

**Sample profile.** Approximately three of every ten respondents had previously been involved in the Sister Cities program; the remaining 70% reported no involvement. Those with previous involvement reflect various connections to the program: for instance, 37 individuals had gone on a Sister Cities mission trip, 17 were members of a partner organization, 13 are or had been Montgomery Sister Cities board members, 13 were county government staff, 12 had personally contributed money to the program, 8 were participants from Montgomery College, 4 were elected officials.

Most of those who had prior involvement first became involved in the program 5 to 10 years ago (35%) or 2 to 5 years ago (30%). Thirty-seven respondents (14% of the sample) had traveled to at least one of the five Sister Cities on a mission trip.

Almost two-thirds of the survey respondents were born in the U.S (133 people). Other places of origin represented in the sample are Latin America (20), Africa (15), India or Pakistan (10), other Asian country (15).

The sample skews old and female. Almost half of the respondents are 60 or older, while only about 1 in every 7 respondents (about 14%) is younger than 45. Women outnumber men 62% to 34% (the remaining 4% marked “other” or declined to answer). Only 2% were 30 or younger.

**Familiarity with the program.** About half of the respondents are either very familiar (20%) or somewhat familiar (29%) with the program, and the other half knows only a little or nothing about it. Because those who chose not to take the survey are almost certainly less familiar with Montgomery Sister Cities than those who did take the survey, this level of familiarity likely overstates actual familiarity.

**Most popular Sites Cities.** Gondar, Ethiopia is the most popular of the five Sister Cities — the one currently eliciting the most interest from the group surveyed. Moražan, El Salvador is not far behind. Hyderabad, India and Daejeon, South Korea fall in the mid-range of popularity, and Xi’an, China elicits in this survey a bit less interest than the other four cities.

**Ranking goals of the program.** Respondents were asked to rank five goals of the program in terms of their relative importance. The rankings for the goals were

converted into scores, with goals scoring higher perceived as more important. The results:

6. Creating a welcoming environment - broadening our understanding of cultures from other countries represented in Montgomery County. **Score: 691**
7. Community engagement - developing relationships with underrepresented and underserved ethnic and faith communities in the county. **Score: 673**
8. Economic development - providing economic development opportunities for Montgomery County businesses and bringing new businesses here from Sister Cities countries. **Score: 576**
9. Humanitarian projects - fostering local involvement in efforts helping people living in our Sister Cities. **Score: 568**
10. Preparing global citizens for the future - promoting trips for local young people to broaden their skills and help them thrive in the globalized world. **Score: 562**

Comment: Although the five goals are fairly tightly clustered in terms of importance, *creating a welcoming environment* and *community engagement* moderately outdistance the other three.

**Interest in future Sister Cities programming.** Respondents were asked their likelihood of attending four types of programs, once it is judged appropriate to schedule them. Here is how they rank in terms of the percent who marked they would definitely or probably attend:

1. Exhibitions featuring the art of one or more Sister Cities..... 65%
2. Seminars relating to a Sister City's history and culture..... 60%
3. Concerts featuring the music of one or more Sister Cities ... 57%
4. Sessions about economic development opportunities ..... 45%

Comment: Economic development sessions generates less interest than the other three.

**Interest in working on a Sister Cities committee.** Nearly 4 in every 10 respondents indicated they would definitely (19%) or probably (20%) be willing to

work on a Sister Cities committee that meets six times a year. The committees plan trips and other program activities.

**Attractions and obstacles to joining future mission trips.** *Participating in a humanitarian service project and learning about a new culture* would be the main reasons for joining a Sister Cities trip — reasons that are equally prevalent. Other reasons, such as *traveling with county officials* and *business recruitment* are far less common.

*Perceived high cost* is the most frequently marked obstacle (31%), followed by *concerns about the Covid-19 pandemic* (19%). *Too much time away, health reasons, and safety concerns* are much less often seen as reasons for deciding not to join a Sister Cities mission.

**What could Montgomery Sister Cities do to make future trips attractive to you?**

*Reduce the high cost or expense, offer subsidy* and similar answers were volunteered most often as the action that would make the trip more attractive. *Providing more advance information or better communication about the trip* was also noted as something that would heighten interest in the trips as was *providing testimonials from those who had been on previous trips*. A few mentioned *needing reassurance about health and safety concerns*.

Comment: That approximately three-quarters of the sample chose to answer this optional, open-ended question indicates strong potential interest in Sister Cities mission trips and provides a rich source of information to those working to strengthen the Sister Cities program.

**Impact of the current pandemic on support for the Sister Cities program.**

Respondents read the following statement and were asked to choose which of two reactions better reflects their attitude: *We are currently experiencing a global health pandemic and economic crisis. Our county budget is under stress.* Roughly equal numbers of respondents selected each reaction:

- 47% chose: *We need to focus on other priorities right now.*
- 53% chose: *We need programs like Sister Cities now more than ever to rebuild global understanding and cooperation.*

Comment: The sample is sharply divided over the desirability of making the Sister Cities program a priority in the current environment.

**Effect of CDC giving the “all clear” to travel.** Approximately 6 of every 10 respondents would feel comfortable traveling on a mission if the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) stated that it is safe to travel; 1 in 10 respondents would still not feel comfortable; and the remaining 30% are not sure.

**Interest in participating in possible future virtual Sister Cities events.** The following numbers of respondents said they would definitely or probably be interested in attending or participating if these events were held virtually using Zoom or some similar technology:

- Virtual trips to one or more of the five Sister Cities .... **62%**
- A virtual Town Hall about the future of the Montgomery Sister Cities program .... **56%**
- A virtual World of Montgomery Festival .... **51%**
- A virtual Summit with leaders from Montgomery County and all five Sister Cities .... **50%**

Comment: Touring the Sister Cities via Zoom is the most popular event.

**To conclude.** Although the sample from which these results are generated is not representative of Montgomery County residents, it should provide a reasonably accurate glimpse of that segment of the local population interested in promoting multicultural diversity and social inclusion. As such, the data can be useful in helping guide Montgomery Sister Cities as it attempts to refresh its activities in the months ahead.