

S.226

Introduced by Senators Clarkson and Hardy

Referred to Committee on

Date:

Subject: Executive; Agency of Commerce and Community Development;  
Sister State Program

Statement of purpose of bill as introduced: This bill proposes to create the Vermont Sister State Program to be overseen by the Sister State Program Committee. The Committee, with the assistance of the Agency of Commerce and Community Development, will review applications and recommend to the Governor whether an official sister state relationship should be formalized.

An act relating to the creation of the Vermont Sister State Program

It is hereby enacted by the General Assembly of the State of Vermont:

Sec. 1. 3 V.S.A. § 2479 is added to read:

§ 2479. VERMONT SISTER STATE PROGRAM

(a) Creation and purpose.

(1) The Vermont Sister State Program is created within the Agency of Commerce and Community Development. The Agency shall provide support to the Program and to the Sister State Program Committee as required.

1           (2) The purpose of the Program is to strengthen Vermont's international  
2           engagement and to foster mutually beneficial relationships with subnational  
3           governments abroad, with a goal of promoting cultural exchange, economic  
4           development, educational cooperation, and diplomatic collaboration.

5           (b) Program oversight.

6           (1) The Sister State Program Committee, composed of the following  
7           members, shall oversee the Program:

8           (A) the Secretary of Commerce and Community Development or  
9           designee;

10          (B) a member of the House of Representatives, appointed by the  
11          Speaker of the House;

12          (C) a member of the Senate, appointed by the Committee on  
13          Committees;

14          (D) the Chair of the Board of Trustees of the Vermont Council on  
15          World Affairs or designee;

16          (E) the Vermont Adjutant General or designee;

17          (F) the Chair of the Board of Trustees of the Vermont Arts Council  
18          or designee; and

19          (G) three members, as follows:

20               (i) one member with expertise in cultural exchange or in Peace  
21               Corps operations, appointed by the Governor;

1                   (ii) one member representing a private institution of higher  
2                   education, appointed by the Committee on Committees; and

3                   (iii) one member representing a public institution of higher  
4                   education, appointed by the Speaker of the House.

5                   (2) Members of the Committee shall serve two-year terms, provided that  
6                   members appointed pursuant to subdivision (1)(G) of this subsection shall  
7                   serve initial terms of three years each to establish staggered terms. Members  
8                   may be reappointed.

9                   (3) The Committee shall elect a chair and vice chair from among its  
10                  members that shall each serve a two-year term.

11                  (4) A majority of the membership shall constitute a quorum.

12                  (c) Meetings.

13                  (1) All meetings shall be called by the Chair, but in the event that the  
14                  Committee does not have a chair, a meeting may be called by the Secretary of  
15                  Commerce and Community Development or designee.

16                  (2) The Committee shall meet:

17                    (A) at least once quarterly, for the purpose of:

18                      (i) evaluating current Sister State Program agreements;

19                      (ii) proposing new Sister State Program agreements;

1                   (iii) preparing its annual report; or

2                   (iv) discussing any other matter that the Committee deems  
3 relevant to its work; and

4                   (B) to review and score an eligible Sister State Program application  
5 not later than 30 days after the Committee receives the application from the  
6 Agency, pursuant to subdivision (d)(3) of this section.

7                   (d) Program application, review, and approval procedures.

8                   (1) Development of application process. The Committee, in  
9 consultation with the Agency of Commerce and Community Development,  
10 shall develop a process by which an entity can apply and be considered for  
11 admission as a partner to the Sister State Program. This process shall include  
12 the development of:

13                   (A) an official application to be in the Program;

14                   (B) a confidential internal review procedure to be used by the  
15 Agency to review Program applicants for sensitive political, legal, ethical, and  
16 strategic factors;

17                   (C) minimum eligibility requirements to be considered for the  
18 Program;

19                   (D) a fixed-scoring system, including a rubric, to be uniformly  
20 applied by the Committee to evaluate all eligible applications; and

1           (E) a memorandum of understanding template to be used and signed  
2           by the State and an approved Sister State Program partner.

3           (2) Agency initial verification.

4           (A) When a Sister State Program application has been received by  
5           the Agency pursuant to this section, the Agency shall, before the Committee  
6           may meet to review the application:

7                   (i) verify that the application meets the Program's minimum  
8                   eligibility requirements; and

9                   (ii) conduct a confidential internal review of the applicant.

10           (B) Not later than 10 days after completion of the Agency's initial  
11           verification and review of an application pursuant to subdivision (A) of this  
12           subdivision (2), the Agency shall send the Committee a copy of the application  
13           along with a summary of the Agency's analysis.

14           (C) The confidential internal review process conducted in subdivision  
15           (A)(ii) of this subdivision (2), along with any and all documents that take place  
16           during that process, shall be exempt from public inspection and copying.

17           (3) Committee review and recommendation.

18           (A) The Committee, upon receiving an application that has received  
19           preliminary approval from the Agency, shall meet to review the application  
20           pursuant to subdivision (c)(2)(B) of this section not later than 30 days after  
21           receipt of the application from the Agency.

1           (B) The Committee shall, not later than 30 days after completing its  
2           review of an application pursuant to subdivision (A) of this subdivision (3),  
3           submit its final recommendation to the Governor along with a copy of the  
4           application.

5           (C) The final recommendation pursuant to subdivision (B) of this  
6           subdivision (3) shall either be that the Committee recommends the application  
7           be approved or that the Committee recommends the application be  
8           disapproved.

9           (4) Governor's review.

10           (A) The Governor shall have the sole authority to issue final approval  
11           or disapproval of a Sister State Program application that the Committee  
12           recommended be approved. The Governor shall not review or approve of a  
13           Program application that the Committee recommended be disapproved. The  
14           Governor shall send written notice of the Governor's decision to the Agency  
15           not later than 10 days after the Governor's decision.

16           (B) If the Governor disapproves a Program application, the  
17           Governor's notice in subdivision (A) of this subdivision (4) shall include a  
18           written explanation of why the Governor did not follow the recommendation of  
19           the Committee.

20           (C) Upon the Agency's receipt of the Governor's decision pursuant  
21           to subdivision (A) of this subdivision (4), the Agency shall notify the applicant

1 of the Governor's decision not later than 30 days after the Agency receives  
2 notice of the Governor's decision.

3 (D) If the application is approved by the Governor, the Agency shall  
4 finalize a memorandum of understanding between the State and the Sister State  
5 Program applicant.

6 (e) Reporting. The Committee shall submit an annual report not later than  
7 January 15 of each year to the Governor and to the House Committee on  
8 Commerce and Economic Development and the Senate Committee on  
9 Economic Development, Housing and General Affairs that includes the  
10 following:

11 (1) an executive summary of key development and outcomes of the  
12 Program;

13 (2) a description of Committee activities, including a summary of  
14 attendance and decisions at its meetings;

15 (3) updates on the Program, including an evaluation of sister state  
16 applications, new partners, significant developments, metrics of success, and  
17 challenges;

18 (4) recommendations for new sister state agreements, along with the  
19 rationale for the recommendations and how they align with Vermont's  
20 strategic interests and capacity;

- 1           (5) a description of stakeholder engagement with the Program;  
2           (6) a financial overview, including a summary of funding sources and  
3           expenditures; and  
4           (7) an outlook for the Program, which shall include strategic objectives,  
5           potential new agreements, and growth opportunities for the next year.  
6           (f) Compensation and reimbursement.  
7           (1) For attendance at meetings during adjournment of the General  
8           Assembly, a legislative member of the Committee serving in the member's  
9           capacity as a legislator shall be entitled to per diem compensation and  
10           reimbursement of expenses pursuant to 2 V.S.A. § 23 for not more than eight  
11           meetings per year.  
12           (2) Other members of the Committee shall be entitled to per diem  
13           compensation and reimbursement of expenses as permitted under 32 V.S.A.  
14           § 1010 for not more than eight meetings per year.  
15           (3) Payments to members of the Committee authorized under this  
16           subsection shall be made from monies appropriated to the Agency of  
17           Commerce and Community Development.

18       Sec. 2. EFFECTIVE DATE

19           This act shall take effect on July 1, 2026.