

Vermont Sister State Program Working Group

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FROM

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ABOUT THE WORKING GROUP

Vermont's Sister State Working Group (“the Working Group”) was created during the 2024 legislative session as part of [Act 132](#). The legislature tasked the Working Group with exploring ways to formalize an international exchange system with the goal of enhancing international partnerships, collaboration and economic opportunities. The Working Group was established in August of 2024, and up to the submission of this report has met five times to discuss and pursue system recommendations that will foster cultural, educational, and economic partnerships between Vermont and its sister states or regions worldwide.

While this report serves as a “progress report” in the interim as the group’s work continues, the goal of the working group is to position Vermont as a dynamic and globally connected state while ensuring that the benefits of these partnerships extend to communities, businesses, families, and beyond.

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SECTION I: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Vermont Sister State Working Group (“the Working Group”) was created by the Legislature in 2024 as part of Act 132 to explore strategies for enhancing Vermont’s international partnerships and economic development opportunities. The group was tasked with identifying ways to formalize and expand relationships between Vermont and international regions that share similar values, economic goals, and cultural interests.

Since its establishment in August 2024, the Working Group has met five times to discuss program priorities, governance models, partnership criteria, and engagement strategies. Through case studies and research into sister-state programs in Maryland and Hawaii, as well as Vermont’s existing partnerships with Tottori (Japan), Honfleur (France), Thies (Senegal), and Austria and North Macedonia, the group has gained valuable insights into effective program design and administration. The group has also engaged stakeholders, including the Vermont National Guard and Vermont Council on World Affairs, to explore opportunities for collaboration and alignment with existing initiatives.

The Working Group identified key priorities, including the importance of a public-private partnership model, clear criteria for selecting and dissolving relationships, regional diversity, and alignment with Vermont’s economic goals. Challenges such as funding, program administration, and understanding the full scope of Vermont’s existing international relationships were also acknowledged, along with opportunities to leverage the expertise and networks of Vermont organizations. In 2025, the Working Group plans to conduct an “International Relationships Survey” to inventory current partnerships and use the information collected to inform the programmatic needs of a potential future formal Sister State Program.

By leveraging lessons from successful models in other states and Vermont’s unique strengths, the Sister State Program has the potential to position Vermont as a globally connected state while delivering tangible benefits to communities, businesses, and families.

Sincerely,

Tim Tierney, Co-Chair
Director, International Business Development

Patricia Preston, Co-Chair
Executive Director, Vermont Council on World Affairs

SECTION II. MEMBERS OF THE WORKING GROUP

The members of the working group as established and appointed pursuant to Act 132 are:

Member	Appointed Seat
Tim Tierney, Co-Chair Director of International Business Affairs	<i>Secretary of Commerce and Community designee</i>
Jill Briggs Campbell Agency of Education Deputy Secretary	Secretary of Education designee
Trevor Lowell Assistant Director of Agricultural Development	Secretary of Agriculture designee
Susan Evans-McClure Executive Director, Vermont Arts Council	Vermont Arts Council designee
Patricia Preston, Co-Chair Executive Director, Vermont Council on World Affairs	Vermont Council on World Affairs designee
Major General Gregory Knight Adjutant General	Adjutant General
Lise Veronneau President, Sister City Committee Burlington-Honfleur France	Governor's Appointee with experience in educational or cultural exchanges or in international affairs
Peter Lynch Retired Consultant, Green Across the World, Inc.	Senate Committee on Committees appointee with experience in educational or cultural exchanges in international affairs
Representative Edye Graning Jericho	House Speaker's appointee with experience in educational or cultural exchanges in international affairs
Jessica Vintinner Director of Legislative Affairs	Non-Voting Member - Agency of Commerce and Community Development Administrative Support
Nathan Davidson Economic Development Specialist	Non-Voting Member – Agency of Commerce and Community Development Administrative Support

SECTION III. WORKING GROUP PROGRESS AND ACTIVITIES

I. Identifying Priorities

The Working Group spent a fair amount of time during meetings discussing the priority areas for the potential creation of a formal Vermont Sister State Committee and system. Some of the priorities and themes discussed by the group include:

1. Program Governance

The Working Group is exploring the possibility of a public/private partnership model between a state entity and private/public partner(s) that is currently working in fostering international relationships. In order for this model to be effective, sufficient resources are needed to maintain program sustainability, as well as identifying strong partners who are able to strengthen the sister-state relationship.

2. Partnership and Relation Criteria

The Working Group believes that concise and transparent criteria for selecting sister-state relationships should be created to ensure that relationships are purposeful, mutually beneficial, and impactful. Partnership criteria should incorporate the partner's potential for economic, educational, tourism-based, cultural, or sports/recreation exchange. With that, the Working Group has determined that the possibility of dissolving a relationship should be incorporated into the process with transparency and well-defined parameters. Limiting the term lengths of sister-state relationships has been proposed, as a means of dissolving sister-state ties which aren't meeting the programs goals and objectives.

3. Engagement

To ensure that future partnerships are meeting Vermont's goals and needs, the working group acknowledges the benefits of involving Vermont businesses, colleges, cultural organizations, communities, and non-profits to establish a successful program. The working group has had consistent communication and meeting involvement with personnel from the Vermont National Guard including the Vermont National Guard's Adjutant General- Gregory Knight.

4. Diversity and Regional Engagement

The Working Group believes that regional diversity is key to a successful program, in that balancing partnerships across geographic regions will maximize opportunities across all sectors of partnership.

5. Alignment with Vermont's Goals

The proposed Sister State Program strongly aligns with Vermont's goal of Growing its Economy. Specific objectives under this goal for which the program aligns include: (1) Targeted Out-of-State

Marketing, (2) Industry Preferred Domicile, (3) Expand Agricultural Economy. This program also aligns with Vermont's goal of Protecting the Vulnerable by potentially (1) Increasing the State's Workforce Numbers.

The proposed sister-state program would allow for a variety of targeted out-of-state marketing opportunities. New sister-state relationships will support the planning of summits/conferences for the promotion of Vermont businesses and municipalities to potential out-of-state visitors. Through similar means, this program will also allow for the marketing of Vermont as an industry preferred domicile through bilateral trade missions.

It was found when researching the State of Hawaii's existing sister-state relationships, that they promote their local agricultural commodities to their sister-state's foreign businesses. There is an opportunity for the State of Vermont to do the same in regard to marketing dairy products, maple products, etc...to foreign businesses/consumers. The establishment of new sister-state relationships also provides greater opportunity for the promotion of Vermont in general, to sister-states. Vermont agencies and organizations are given the opportunity to encourage immigration to the state through promotional events/conferences which are hosted by the sister-state governments, and/or any involved organizations.

II. Case Studies and Research

1. Methodology

The Working Group established a process for gathering information and input. This involved obtaining information on a variety of sister state/city programs, meeting with other states, hearing from working group members and their expertise, establishing an internal communication system, and gaining a better understanding of the Vermont National Guard's- State Partnership Program as well as the activities of Vermont Council on World Affairs.

2. Overview

The Sister State Working Group has conducted research on Vermont's existing partnerships which included a closer look at relationships with Taiwan, Thies East, Tottori, and the Honfleur sister-cities. During meetings held in 2024, the Working Group engaged with representatives from Maryland and Hawaii to learn more about their sister-state/city relationships as well as their models for partnership, engagement, and maintaining ongoing relations.

3. Vermont's Existing Sister-State Relationships

a. Tottori Prefecture

Peter Lynch, working group member and retired consultant for Green Across the World, Inc. presented to the working group on Vermont's existing relationship with the Japanese prefecture of Tottori. The relationship was established when Tottori had begun looking for a partner in the US with aligned values. From this search, Tottori had decided between Vermont and Oregon, and in 2008 the International Friendship Agreement between Tottori and the State of Vermont was signed by Governor Douglas. This was then elevated to a Sister State Agreement and signed by Governor Phil Scott and Shinji Hirai at a ceremony in Montpelier in July 2018. Overall, the relationship is seen as well planned and having good intentions by the working group.

b. Honfleur Prefecture

Lise Veronneau, working group member and President of the Honfleur Sister City and Chair of the Burlington-Honfleur France Sister City Committee, presented to the working group on Vermont's existing relationship with the French prefecture of Honfleur.

The Mayor of the City of Burlington on March 21st, 2012, supported the creation of the Honfleur Sister City relationship between Honfleur, France and Burlington, Vermont. It is the first international Sister City for Honfleur, France in the United States of America.

Official delegations from the City of Burlington and the State of Vermont traveled to the city of Honfleur in 2012, on a mission to create and strengthen economic, educational, and cultural connections. This led to the mutual gifting of replicas of Samuel de Champlain's sailing vessel, "Don de Dieu" which Champlain sailed from Honfleur. These replicas now sit in both Honfleur City Hall and the Burlington International Airport as a sign of connection and welcome.

After the celebration of the 400th anniversary of Samuel de Champlain's arrival on Lake Champlain, the relationship and partnership between Honfleur and Burlington was formalized with a Friendship Agreement signed in Burlington, Vermont on July 3, 2013. This allowed for the continued development and success of the French and American relationships.

The relationship has evolved through collaboration with various community members supporting the mission of the Honfleur Sister City Committee. Past collaborations range from the Shelburne's Boy Scout troop traveling to Honfleur, to Champlain College's facilitation of technology projects involving 5 countries with established relationships to Honfleur. The charter between Burlington, Vermont and Honfleur, France was signed

in 2019 in an international transatlantic video conference with the Mayors and the Presidents of the Sister Cities.

4. Maryland & Hawaii Program Design and Discussions:

Both Maryland and Hawaii presented to the Working Group, and both leverage sister state and city partnerships to advance economic, cultural and educational objectives, but their models differ in terms of structure, implementation, and priorities.

a. Program Similarities

- Both programs have formalized agreements that establish relationships internationally either through legislation or formal MOU.
- Both programs have engagement and partnership with State Government through an identified Agency or conduit organization.
- They both utilize their partnerships to promote trade, investment and tourism that align with broader economic development strategies respectively.
- Both programs engage in and plan activities such as trade missions, business forums, and participate in international activities and events;
- Both programs prioritize fostering cultural understanding and cooperation through art and educational exchange programs.

The Group was also able to identify, examine and discuss how the program models differed. Acknowledging and exploring these differences was a productive exercise for the Working Group as the Group contemplated applying similar models in Vermont.

Hawaii's sister state program focuses heavily on tourism and cultural ties – emphasizing areas like hospitality, agriculture and renewable energy. Maryland's program focuses more on science, technology and innovation – and current partnerships are centered around the exchanges in advances technologies, sciences and aerospace.

Hawaii's program places a strong emphasis on frequent engagement with fewer relationships (historically), while Maryland has a broader network of partnerships (approximately 20) which are cultivated through a nonprofit conduit organization. When it comes to measuring success of relationships, Maryland and Hawaii both utilize performance measures tied to the industries their programs prioritize. These measures of success include the level of government and private support for the partnership, potential for economic development, existing cultural ties and potential for improved ties, as well as the potential for academic exchanges.

5. VCWA & State Partnership Program:

The sister state working group discussed the National Guard's- State Partnership Program as well as the Vermont Council on World Affairs' current programming/potential role in new sister-state relationships. The group discussed the Vermont Council on World Affairs' partnership with the Vermont National Guard

and Austria, as well as their interest in integrating sister-state programs that are currently administered by the Vermont National Guard. The group also discussed the Council's work with local partners, embassies and others to establish new ties and target developing programs. Along with this, the Vermont National Guard's role in overseeing our state partnership with North Macedonia was discussed, as a means of exploring foreign apprenticeship programs and their potential role in developing Vermont's workforce.

6. World Affairs Council of Philadelphia:

The Sister State Working Group heard from Lauren, the President and CEO of the World Affairs Council of Philadelphia (WAC Philly). They are the largest international NGO in the Philadelphia tri-state area, working directly with the City of Philadelphia to promote FDI and International Trade while also acting as the non-profit facilitator of the City of Philadelphia's Sister Cities program. WAC Philly manages all of Philadelphia's sister city relationships which includes 11 sister cities, yet do not coordinate with the State of Pennsylvania's National Guard.

Being the "front door" for new/existing sister city relationships, WAC Philly do not draft the formal agreements/MOUs themselves but instead make recommendations to the City on which relationships to formalize and how they should be structured, acting as a conduit organization for the City of Philadelphia. WAC Philly utilize their partnerships to promote economic ties by coordinating business alliances and connecting technical experts. WAC Philly also engages in cultural and educational exchanges. The City of Philadelphia's "Sister Cities Park" named after the international Sister Cities program, demonstrates their commitment to fostering international partnerships through cultural ties. Having a large number of universities in the region, WAC Philly also helps facilitate a variety of educational exchange programs. It is important to their organization that all of these activities are supported through continued diplomacy with frequent communication to sister cities through new years greetings, newsletters, and conducting outreach when something either good or bad happens to a sister city.

WAC Philly is funded through federal/state and city funding as well as private sector donors. The City of Philadelphia contracted with their organization for \$300,000/annually to oversee and build upon the existing Sister Cities program. This funding unfortunately is insufficient and has been supplemented through the private sector which WAC Philly had to fight their way into for additional funding. They have been hesitant to receive private donations due to most private donors earmarking their funds towards a specific relationship instead of the program as whole, leading to smaller donation amounts which are restricted in their use. When asked what the funding requirements are for a Sister Cities program, Lauren was unable to provide a clear answer due to WAC Philly's hesitancy to role out more programs, following a recent change in administration.

The working group was able to determine the importance of a non-profit/NGO conduit organization in establishing/maintaining sister city relationships. The working group also got clarification on the need for a clear funding path, as changes in administration and insufficient private donors can lead to funding challenges. Currently WAC Philly has incorporated the activities of the Sister City program into their

organization but have been unable to make it its own entity due to a lack of clarity surrounding future funds.

III. Takeaways

What the Working Group learned from these case studies is as follows:

- States align their programs with their unique geographic and economic strengths, regardless of their different approaches.
- States bilaterally promote economic development with sister-states through trade missions, business forums, and conferences/summits focused on domestic businesses or commodities.
- States are dependent on the involvement of private organizations including quasi-governmental organizations to establish and maintain sister-state relationships.
- There is an opportunity to build upon the sister-state relationships administered by the Vermont National Guard's- State Relationship Program.
- Vermont's existing sister-state relationships had been established with prefectures that shared similar values, as was expressed during the early phases of developing these relationships. While historical precedence is valuable for strengthening sister-state ties, shared values alone are sufficient for establishing new sister-state relationships.
- Non-profit/NGO conduit organizations are essential for filtering potential partnerships and maintaining the relationship after a formal agreement.
- Clear and consistent funding is essential in order to properly plan program activities.

SECTION IV. CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

While the Working group spent a fair amount of time discussion potential program design and outcomes, there was a fair amount of time discussing challenges and opportunities.

I. Challenges Identified:

1. Understanding Existing International Relationships

While the group heard from several members of the working group on what programs exists in Vermont currently, it was identified that there was not an “inventory” of existing programs or entities that are currently working in the international exchange space. In order to move forward, while not duplicating efforts, the group identified that it needed to better understand the entire scope of the work occurring in Vermont.

2. Funding: Another challenge the group identified was the lack of understanding regarding how much a future program and system might cost.
3. Program Administration: There were also challenges identified in understanding how sister-state relationships are maintained and by whom.

II. Opportunities Identified

1. Collaboration with Vermont Organizations/Entities: The working group Identified that there are opportunities for enhanced collaboration, and future initiatives between existing Vermont organizations/entities.
2. Successes/Challenges of Other Programs: There's the opportunity to model Vermont's Sister-State Program off another state's existing program. The Sister-State Working Group had met with the State of Maryland and Hawaii to determine what successes/challenges their programs experienced.
3. Administration of Other Programs: Opportunity to mimic the technical details of other program(s) (i.e. Application form, administrative guidelines, etc...). The State of Hawaii sent the Sister-State Working Group their application form as well as a copy of their Committee Meeting Packet to advise how this program should be administered.
4. International Relationships Survey: Identify existing international relationships Vermont organizations/entities have through the distribution of an "International Relationships Survey". There are several partners and organizations outside of State Government that currently leverage their established networks and expertise to deepen Vermont's global engagement. In 2025 the Working Group will begin to inventory these partners, as a way to not only identify them but to also better understand the foundation currently exists for this work that the Working Group may build upon.

SECTION V. CONCLUSION

The Sister State Working Group has made significant progress in its initial exploration of how to enhance and formalize Vermont's international partnerships. By identifying priorities, examining successful programs in other states, and evaluating existing relationships, the Working Group has laid the groundwork to inform recommendations for a sustainable and impactful Sister State Program in Vermont. Despite challenges such as funding and administrative logistics, the opportunities for collaboration and economic growth are substantial. Moving forward, the group will continue refining its framework, conducting outreach, and developing recommendations for legislative consideration. By fostering purposeful and

mutually beneficial international relationships, Vermont can unlock new opportunities for trade, cultural exchange, and economic and workforce development, ensuring a more connected future for the State.