

The Columbus Dispatch

Sister cities putting new focus on business Follow-up is key after recent trip to India, local officials say

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When Sister Cities International started, it promoted cultural understanding through education, the arts, sports and friendship between mayors.

But the focus has shifted from culture to business since 1955, when Columbus' first sister city presented Columbus with a statue of its namesake. That city, Genoa, Italy, was Christopher Columbus' birthplace.

Yesterday, a central Ohio delegation briefed government and business leaders about their trip last month to Columbus' newest sister city, Ahmedabad, India.

Instead of exchanging statues, city, county and business representatives held 42 economic-development meetings in six Indian cities over 10 days. Franklin County Commissioner John O'Grady said he brought home hundreds of business cards from industries ranging from alternative energy to auto parts.

"We don't want this to just be some other trade mission to see the world," he said. "From the beginning, I said we have to make this a worthwhile thing."

Government officials long have struggled to ensure that overseas trips translate into foreign investment and better trade opportunities.

The tricky part is follow-up, said Commissioner Marilyn Brown, who traveled to Israel in 2008.

Past trade missions have had tangible success, but sometimes the initial buzz fizzles out. In 1998, officials lamented that, after 19 years, Columbus and Tainan City, Taiwan, still hadn't accomplished much as sister cities.

That's where Columbus 2020!, a public/private development agency, and SGI Global Business Advisors, a consulting firm, are supposed to come in. They were in charge of planning the India trip,

Our sister cities

Although ties with some of the older sister cities are not particularly active, Columbus has developed relationships with eight cities through Sister Cities International. The cities and the year that the relationship began:



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scheduling worthwhile meetings, keeping in touch with companies and helping organize foreign visits to Columbus.

"When people come back, they're all excited," said Howard Gudell, a partner at SGI. "But it's going to be 12 months from now when you're going to say, what did we get back for our investment?"

Columbus 2020! intends to take a more-aggressive approach than past efforts, said CEO Kenny McDonald. The agency plans to send staff members to Germany, England, the Nordic region, China, Israel and Canada this year as well as to India again.

Columbus 2020!, which doesn't focus only on international business, has a \$5 million budget. The county, city and other public funds pay for more than a quarter of that. The county contributed \$68,000 specifically for international development, including the contract for SGI.

Columbus also spent about \$13,000 to send Michael H. Stevens, a deputy director in the city's Development Department, on the India trip. The three county officials who went raised their own money. O'Grady tapped into his campaign funds.

City and county officials said the presence of government leaders showed Indian businesses that central Ohio is serious about foreign investment, and it gave companies a chance to ask questions.

Michael Zatezalo, managing director of the Kegler, Brown, Hill & Ritter law firm, was one of the business representatives on the trip. He's been to India before, but he said having government officials along helped.

"We have a lot more credibility now and a lot more referrals," he said.

But Jagadish Prabhala, president of the Federation of Indian Associations-Central Ohio, said that to make these sorts of trips successful, the region needs to do even more.

"Every other state is doing exactly what we are, but they have bigger budgets," he said. "Indianapolis is the sister city of (Hyderabad). Washington, D.C., is the sister city of Delhi."

Trips lay groundwork for future opportunities that could create local jobs, said James Schimmer, the county's economic-development director.

Delegates said there already has been some success. An Indian packaging company has visited central Ohio since the trip to look at potential sites, and a delegation is scheduled to visit later this year.

"The bottom line," O'Grady said, "is that the trip is just the initial hello."

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