



Saskatchewan Municipal

Management Resource

Establishing a Municipal Twinning or Sister-City Program

This document discusses what twinning can be and how it can work, formalizing the relationship, and various other considerations that may assist a community to establish and maintain successful and enjoyable international friendships.

This document is intended to provide general information to Saskatchewan communities that are interested in establishing an international community twinning initiative. The following points are offered merely as suggestions and are in no way meant to provide authoritative direction.

Introduction

Canada does not appear to have formal organization that works exclusively to facilitate the twinning of towns or cities with counterparts in other countries, such as Sister Cities International (<http://www.sister-cities.org/>) in the USA. However, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) has a formal partnering program (http://www.icmd-cidm.ca/ev.php?URL_ID=2083&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201&reload=1085063701) through its International Office to facilitate municipal governments to establish partnerships with local governments in other countries. Saskatchewan communities may be able to access information from the FCM in this regard through their respective municipal associations. Numerous twinning arrangements exist between Saskatchewan towns and cities with partners from around the world. These communities may be a wealth of information about protocol agreements and the issues that should be considered in establishing a twinning program.

In most instances in the Canadian context it appears that twinning agreements happen as a result of existing or newly formed relationships between citizens of different countries. This may occur as the result of the mayor/reeve or a councillor of the time visiting a town or city and responding to a request from that local government, or promoting the liaison independently with a particular interest in mind.

A twin municipality relationship is typically a broad-based, officially approved, long-term partnership between two communities in two countries. A common and less formal type of twinning is defined as a friendship agreement involving co-operation between two communities in different countries, endorsed by both local authorities. The twinned communities may organize projects and activities around a range of issues and develop an understanding of historical, cultural, life style similarities and differences. These activities can include a wide range of community members and often involves direct person-to-person contact.

A municipal twin or sister city relationship typically becomes official with a signing ceremony of the top-elected officials of the two local jurisdictions, following approval by the local government councils. Twinning partnerships have the potential to carry out the widest possible diversity of activities of any international program, including every type of municipal, business, professional, educational and cultural exchange or project. Twinning programs are also unique in that they often involve the three main sectors in a community: local government, businesses, and a wide variety of citizen volunteers (such as service clubs and non-profit organizations). It is important to note that a twinning agreement for the promotion of inter-community relations is in most instances an informal document, indicating mutual intentions and goodwill, but which does not entail the creation of a legally binding arrangement.

Official municipal visits, commercial contacts, and exchanges of youth, sports, music and other special interest groups often achieve the goals of a twinning program. The level of formality of the contacts between twinning communities varies from case to case, but due to the varied mutual activities, undoubtedly many close personal bonds can be formed.

Selecting a Municipal Twin or Sister City

Choosing a municipality to twin with can be aided by a whole host of circumstances. Certainly a twinning must be of benefit to both communities. In more practical terms twin communities may more easily develop when an initial visit is financially viable and they are able to effectively communicate in the necessary manner to establish a relationship.

Several other factors may also come into play in selecting a suitable twin community.

- Population size and other features of commonality such as being border towns, rural municipalities, or developed on a riverfront.
- Similar features such as both communities having a particular type of industry or institution.
- A shared historical connection such as having similar names or related founders.

There can be many reasons for selecting a particular community to twin with so long as both communities can benefit from the relationship.

Organizing for Success

Establishing and maintaining a twinning program over the long-term can be quite a challenge. This is especially true if the responsibility is left completely with municipal elected and administrative officials. While municipal officials are very dedicated, key individuals may come and go over time, and as elected officials will undoubtedly also have a lot of other priorities to worry about. The long-term sustainability of a twinning partnership must be considered early on in the process of development. Further, with municipal funds often in short supply, laying out realistic goals and establishing ways to maintain the momentum of the partnership/friendship are necessary for long-term success.

There are many things you should consider when establishing a twinning program. Here are a few key things to remember as you embark on this journey:

1. Clear support and involvement from the municipal council and staff is likely to be a critical factor in ensuring that a twinning project is successful in both the short and long-term.
2. Establish a local committee with varied representation from local government, business, service clubs, youth and so on. In this way, municipal elections and changing responsibilities and interests of key individuals will have less of an impact on the continuation of the twinning relationship. Such local groups can be powerful sources of energy in nurturing a twinning relationship. They can assist with fund-raising, hosting and hospitality for visiting delegations. As well, their arms-length association with the local government council means that individual people (not just municipal officials) are truly reaching out. Such a local committee could recommend all related policy to Council for action. It could also act in a

promotional sense, encouraging the community at large to take advantage of the benefits from the twinning relationship. However, to maintain the direct endorsement and direction from successive municipal councils you should consider having the sitting Mayor serve as honorary chair, a staff person designated from the municipal office to help with minor administrative needs, and some agreement on assistance for committee administrative costs such as a meeting room, access to a photocopier and so on.

3. Determine the type of partnership that your community is interested in establishing and able to live up to. There are many different types of twinning agreements. Some are formal protocol agreements or twinning links, involving the signing of a document, charter or memorandum of understanding. Some initiatives could involve time-limited projects such as *"an information exchange between service clubs, to be active for the period of 2009-2013"*; and some may be informal links with no kind of written agreement or protocol. However, whatever type of link will work for your community, it is important to consider the following:
 - For a twinning arrangement a Friendship Agreement may serve the purpose to simply state a mutual interest in identifying the communities as being twinned with one another and as a gesture of goodwill to encourage friendly relations. No commitments to any actions or follow-up are involved.
 - A Record of Discussion is a method to indicate a minimum level of commitment by a local government. It is used in instances where the parties desire or need a document for a signing ceremony or some other purpose but for which there is not enough authority or approval to justify a commitment or any follow-up. A Record of Discussion does not put the community's reputation on the line should follow-up of any kind not occur.
 - A Letter of Intent (LOI) is an instrument that indicates a more formal level of protocol and commitment than the Record of Discussion. The LOI would typically contain an explicit intention by the parties to act in ways described in the agreement. However, the Letter is still only an intention to act in a particular way and is not an absolutely firm commitment. It allows for considerable flexibility in how the agreement is implemented. This Letter can create an expectation among the parties that particular actions will follow, so a community must be in a position to allocate resources and make appropriate arrangements as agreed to.
 - A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) indicates that the parties are more firmly committed to delivering the contents of the agreement, and for that reason an MOU is typically more detailed and specific than the LOI. An MOU will usually require that the parties be in a position, prior to signing, of having their local arrangements and resources (financial/personnel) in place so that such firm commitments can be made. An MOU should not be entered into lightly as expectations for follow-through are high and the community's reputation is on the line.
 - Other general considerations may be applicable depending on the level of commitment involved:
 - There should be common understanding between the twin communities;
 - There should be effective communication;
 - The purpose and objectives of the partnership need to be clear and transparent;
 - The agreement should not be cosmetic; and
 - Mechanisms need to be in place to involve the wider community, if appropriate.
4. When formalizing a twinning relationship you may wish to put into words (in the appropriate languages) the specific agreed desires of each community. For example:
 - To establish and maintain recognition of each other as a Twin Municipality or Sister City;
 - To promote and develop friendly relations, understanding and respect; and,
 - To encourage and assist where possible exchanges and visits between youth, volunteer groups, service clubs, businesses, and others. Activities could involve development of human and cultural relations, knowledge and information sharing, general tourism, business development, educational links and so on.

5. If a twinning agreement is to be signed the ceremony should be arranged in one or both of the communities. This ceremony could take many forms, but may be conducted during a special municipal council meeting. With the approval of council the highest official (Mayor or Reeve) of the jurisdiction is the likely individual to be the formal signatory to the agreement. You may also wish to consider gaining the most publicity possible from such a signing by hosting the event during a national or local holiday, festival or other special community event.
6. It is very important to have reliable methods to maintain communication with your twin community. This includes phone, fax and Internet communications. Communication from a twin community should be responded to as soon as possible to maintain good relations. At a minimum you should acknowledge receipt of a communication and indicate a timeline when you expect to fully reply to their message or request.
7. To maintain a current and friendly twinning relationship it is also important to attempt to meet in person frequently to discuss the partnership, interests, and realities of budget limitations and so on. A number of low-cost contact methods that should be used annually whether or not you actually get to visit each other face to face are:
 - Have the Mayors/Reeves and councils exchange an annual "state of the municipality" letter;
 - Have community officials exchange municipal annual reports and development plans (if available);
 - Involve area schools and youth organizations to exchange children's artwork and letters, or to establish pen-pal programs;
 - A local school may wish to develop a sister-school program through the Internet;
 - Consider periodic exchanges of newspapers or local news items; and,
 - Each community could hold a special supper or entertainment event to celebrate the twinning relationship, highlighting mutual historical, culinary, ceremonial and other cultural features.

A twinning program can be very rewarding. Reaching out to people in other parts of the world is a means to bring greater acceptance, understanding and education to all involved. If established with the long-term in mind, successive generations in your community will be enriched through this international relationship.