

# Amid COVID-19, Toulouse demonstrates ability to overcome unexpected challenges

**ATLANTA** - Toulouse has proved time and time again how to overcome unexpected challenges. In 2001, The city of Toulouse—located on the Garonne plain in the heart of southwest France—was rocked by a devastating chemical factory explosion that demanded the quick evacuation of schools, hospitals, and one university campus. The strategy saved lives and helped to consolidate the city’s notoriety as possessing a steadfast and resilient community. Four years later, Atlanta presented Toulouse with a gift to demonstrate friendship and solidarity as a sister city partner—a phoenix statue which represents the mythological bird that rises from its ashes and is a symbol of rebirth. This work of art, which spans over fifteen feet on its nine-foot pedestal, is located at the Jardin de Caffarelli, one of Toulouse’s main urban parks.

The city of Toulouse now grapples with its newest challenge, a challenge shared with nations and municipalities across the globe—the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of the pandemic, Toulouse witnessed a profound reduction in the demand for air travel. In the first two months of 2020, the Toulouse-Paris route was the most popular in Europe with 50 daily flights. But with the advent of the health crisis, airlines were forced to reduce their frequency to only two flights per day.



On the other hand, Toulouse benefited from its diverse healthcare infrastructure and the creation of 12 emergency health hubs across the city. Together with its shutdown plan, the city was less affected by the virus in comparison with other European metropolises in terms of fatalities per one million inhabitants. According to Mr. Jean-Claude Dardelet, Vice President of the Toulouse Metropolis Board, the population engagement to the local recovery plan was essential to its success. “There was no panic [among Toulouse’s citizens]. The city is so vibrant, but from one day to another, it was empty. Beyond that, we did very well concerning the maintenance of vital activities such as health care, security, and public services”. Mr. Dardelet was also inspired by the expression of solidarity among the local population. “We received hundreds of thousands of volunteer proposals [concerning the city’s response to COVID-19]. That is much more than we needed”.

Regarding its diplomatic ties, Toulouse connects daily with its partners from the European Association of Cities through virtual meetings. In these sessions, they exchange best practices in the fight against the virus, as well as various strategies to implement a phased reopening of their cities. The French city also participated in the virtual summit “Sister City Diplomacy & COVID-19: Looking Ahead to the New Normal” last month, organized by the City of Atlanta Mayor’s Office of International Affairs, with representatives of over ten cities in attendance. “Thanks to the crisis, we realized how important it is to reinforce these connections,” Mr. Dardelet explains. Because of the constraints of being isolated, the international community is able to “establish ties that did not exist before,” he concludes.

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