



Mayor's Office of
International Affairs

Atlanta's sister cities discuss how to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic

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ATLANTA - In an effort to stay connected with sister city partners and share the impact and challenges of navigating the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic, the City of Atlanta Mayor's Office of International Affairs (MOIA) organized the virtual summit "Sister City Diplomacy & COVID-19: Looking Ahead to the New Normal". Representatives of over 10 cities were in attendance including, Toulouse, France; Nuremberg, Germany; Taipei, Republic of China (Taiwan); Daegu, South Korea; Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; Lagos, Nigeria; Ra'anana, Israel; Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom; and Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago. The event was moderated by Ms. Paulina Guzman, Global Engagement Officer, who also serves as the liaison to the Atlanta Sister Cities Commission (ASCC) and its 17 sister cities. ASCC promotes mutually beneficial cultural, educational, economic, and community development exchanges and people-to-people diplomacy.



Clockwise from top left: Paulina Guzman, MOIA Global Engagement Officer; Leroy Allala, President, Sister Cities International; Matt Ohm, Chair, Atlanta Sister Cities Commission; Teri Simmons, Georgia State Sister Cities Commission Coordinator; and Vanessa Ibarra, MOIA Director

Sister City representatives had the opportunity to share challenges they are facing with the current health crisis, and how they continue to engage in international diplomacy and promote cooperation among their communities. One of the main areas of concern is how cities could transition back to “normality” while still maintaining health and safety precautions. For example, Toulouse was able to reopen their nursery and primary schools, but classes are limited to 10 students. The City of Nuremberg reopened their hair salons under strict rules and safety standards established by the federal administration. Taipei focused on sanitation and disease prevention measures like disinfecting metro stations, carriages, and public equipment regularly. And Port-of-Spain continues to enforce social distancing practices in public areas like grocery stores, parks, airports, and beaches.

Beyond health and safety precautions, there has been an emphasis on equitable community engagement and leveraging resources across various disciplines. The City of Ra’anana has mobilized a network of young people who make phone calls to seniors and the elderly to offer resources and assistance as needed. Newcastle has leveraged universities and international partners to obtain information regarding successful public health standards and practices that are being implemented across the world. Daegu mentioned the donation of face masks to Wuhan (China), the first region to report COVID-19 cases. Lastly, Rio de Janeiro’s representative suggested creating an alliance of sister cities for economic recovery best practices.

In response to this new era of international diplomacy, Ms. Teri Simmons, Georgia State Sister Cities Commission Coordinator, provided her perspective, “Not everybody can afford to come to events like these in-person. Cities have challenges with budgets. This gives us a back-up [strategy] we have never explored properly in the past to be able to come together.” Ms. Vanessa Ibarra, Director of International Affairs for the City of Atlanta Mayor’s Office of International Affairs offered concluding remarks which underscored the impact of sister city partnerships and international diplomacy, “We need to work together to overcome this. We are not alone. We are in this together and will get through this together”. ♦



Participants of the “Sister City Diplomacy & COVID-19: Looking Ahead to the New Normal” webinar