

June 8, 2020

Survey Report: Montgomery Sister Cities

Executive Summary

Montgomery Sister Cities was established in 2009 as a community nonprofit to serve as partner to the county government to create and advance the Sister City program. In its first decade under the leadership of Montgomery Sister Cities and County Executive Ike Leggett, Montgomery County established Sister City relationships in the five countries of origin with the county's largest immigrant populations:

- Morazán, El Salvador (2011);
- Gondar, Ethiopia (2012);
- Xi'an, China (2014);
- Hyderabad, India (2014); and
- Daejeon, South Korea (2017).

County Executive Marc Elrich and Office of Community Partnerships (OCP) director Diane Vu are committed to strengthening and keeping each of our Sister City relationships as a means of advancing community engagement, cultural understanding, and economic development. They commissioned Bruce Adams, former Councilmember and former Office of Community Partnerships director, to study what is working and what can be improved to strengthen Montgomery County's Sister Cities program.

As part of this study, an online survey was conducted May 27 to June 3, 2020 with recipients of OCP's newsletter. The survey invitation was sent to approximately 3,100 persons, including a small number of others not on the list but who had expressed interest in the Sister Cities program — an audience predisposed to favor efforts to showcase Montgomery County's diversity. The survey instructed people to assume when answering that current pandemic restrictions on in-person interactions are temporary and that normal Sister City activities would resume. The emailed invitation generated 228 usable responses.

Montgomery Sister Cities is grateful to Sid Groeneman, a public opinion and marketing research professional who volunteered his services to develop and

implement the survey; also, to Nazaret Berhane for her assistance in helping compile the names and email addresses for the sample.

Sample profile. Approximately three of every ten respondents had previously been involved in the Sister Cities program; the remaining 70% reported no involvement. Those with previous involvement reflect various connections to the program: for instance, 37 individuals had gone on a Sister Cities mission trip, 17 were members of a partner organization, 13 are or had been Montgomery Sister Cities board members, 13 were county government staff, 12 had personally contributed money to the program, 8 were participants from Montgomery College, 4 were elected officials.

Most of those who had prior involvement first became involved in the program 5 to 10 years ago (35%) or 2 to 5 years ago (30%). Thirty-seven respondents (14% of the sample) had traveled to at least one of the five Sister Cities on a mission trip.

Almost two-thirds of the survey respondents were born in the U.S (133 people). Other places of origin represented in the sample are Latin America (20), Africa (15), India or Pakistan (10), other Asian country (15).

The sample skews old and female. Almost half of the respondents are 60 or older, while only about 1 in every 7 respondents (about 14%) is younger than 45. Women outnumber men 62% to 34% (the remaining 4% marked “other” or declined to answer). Only 2% were 30 or younger.

Familiarity with the program. About half of the respondents are either very familiar (20%) or somewhat familiar (29%) with the program, and the other half knows only a little or nothing about it. Because those who chose not to take the survey are almost certainly less familiar with Montgomery Sister Cities than those who did take the survey, this level of familiarity likely overstates actual familiarity.

Most popular Sites Cities. Gondar, Ethiopia is the most popular of the five Sister Cities — the one currently eliciting the most interest from the group surveyed. Moražan, El Salvador is not far behind. Hyderabad, India and Daejeon, South Korea fall in the mid-range of popularity, and Xi’an, China elicits in this survey a bit less interest than the other four cities.

Ranking goals of the program. Respondents were asked to rank five goals of the program in terms of their relative importance. The rankings for the goals were converted into scores, with goals scoring higher perceived as more important. The results:

1. Creating a welcoming environment - broadening our understanding of cultures from other countries represented in Montgomery County. **Score: 691**
2. Community engagement - developing relationships with underrepresented and underserved ethnic and faith communities in the county. **Score: 673**
3. Economic development - providing economic development opportunities for Montgomery County businesses and bringing new businesses here from Sister Cities countries. **Score: 576**
4. Humanitarian projects - fostering local involvement in efforts helping people living in our Sister Cities. **Score: 568**
5. Preparing global citizens for the future - promoting trips for local young people to broaden their skills and help them thrive in the globalized world. **Score: 562**

Comment: Although the five goals are fairly tightly clustered in terms of importance, *creating a welcoming environment* and *community engagement* moderately outdistance the other three.

Interest in future Sister Cities programming. Respondents were asked their likelihood of attending four types of programs, once it is judged appropriate to schedule them. Here is how they rank in terms of the percent who marked they would definitely or probably attend:

1. Exhibitions featuring the art of one or more Sister Cities..... 65%
2. Seminars relating to a Sister City's history and culture..... 60%
3. Concerts featuring the music of one or more Sister Cities ... 57%
4. Sessions about economic development opportunities 45%

Comment: Economic development sessions generates less interest than the other three.

Interest in working on a Sister Cities committee. Nearly 4 in every 10 respondents indicated they would definitely (19%) or probably (20%) be willing

to work on a Sister Cities committee that meets six times a year. The committees plan trips and other program activities.

Attractions and obstacles to joining future mission trips. *Participating in a humanitarian service project and learning about a new culture* would be the main reasons for joining a Sister Cities trip — reasons that are equally prevalent. Other reasons, such as *traveling with county officials* and *business recruitment* are far less common.

Perceived high cost is the most frequently marked obstacle (31%), followed by *concerns about the Covid-19 pandemic* (19%). *Too much time away, health reasons, and safety concerns* are much less often seen as reasons for deciding not to join a Sister Cities mission.

What could Montgomery Sister Cities do to make future trips attractive to you? *Reduce the high cost or expense, offer subsidy* and similar answers were volunteered most often as the action that would make the trip more attractive. *Providing more advance information or better communication about the trip* was also noted as something that would heighten interest in the trips as was *providing testimonials from those who had been on previous trips*. A few mentioned *needing reassurance about health and safety concerns*.

Comment: That approximately three-quarters of the sample chose to answer this optional, open-ended question indicates strong potential interest in Sister Cities mission trips and provides a rich source of information to those working to strengthen the Sister Cities program.

Impact of the current pandemic on support for the Sister Cities program.

Respondents read the following statement and were asked to choose which of two reactions better reflects their attitude: *We are currently experiencing a global health pandemic and economic crisis. Our county budget is under stress.* Roughly equal numbers of respondents selected each reaction:

- 47% chose: *We need to focus on other priorities right now.*
- 53% chose: *We need programs like Sister Cities now more than ever to rebuild global understanding and cooperation.*

Comment: The sample is sharply divided over the desirability of making the Sister Cities program a priority in the current environment.

Effect of CDC giving the “all clear” to travel. Approximately 6 of every 10 respondents would feel comfortable traveling on a mission if the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) stated that it is safe to travel; 1 in 10 respondents would still not feel comfortable; and the remaining 30% are not sure.

Interest in participating in possible future virtual Sister Cities events. The following numbers of respondents said they would definitely or probably be interested in attending or participating if these events were held virtually using Zoom or some similar technology:

- Virtual trips to one or more of the five Sister Cities **62%**
- A virtual Town Hall about the future of the Montgomery Sister Cities program **56%**
- A virtual World of Montgomery Festival **51%**
- A virtual Summit with leaders from Montgomery County and all five Sister Cities **50%**

Comment: Touring the Sister Cities via Zoom is the most popular event.

To conclude. Although the sample from which these results are generated is not representative of Montgomery County residents, it should provide a reasonably accurate glimpse of that segment of the local population interested in promoting multicultural diversity and social inclusion. As such, the data can be useful in helping guide Montgomery Sister Cities as it attempts to refresh its activities in the months ahead.

