



**Richmond Sister Cities Commission
RSCC**

ANNUAL REPORT

PROGRAM YEAR 2023

BY: Nin Aseeya Ra-El, RSCC CHAIR

Richmond, Virginia

December 12, 2023

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Program Overview
2. Program Priorities and Strategic Plan
3. Commission Membership
4. Commission Meeting Dates (January to December 2023)
5. Commission Meeting Minutes (January to December 2023)
6. Commission By Law Records
7. Commissioners Attendance (January to December 2023)
8. Budget & Finances
9. Sister Cities Accomplishments and Community Partnership
10. Special Project
11. Program Operations
12. Community Partnership and Collaboration
13. Conclusion: Challenges and Opportunities.

Richmond Sister Cities Commission

ANNUAL REPORT 2023

Part 1: Program Overview

The “Sister Cities” concept was initiated in 1956 by U.S President Dwight D. Eisenhower whose vision is to link U.S cities with cities in other countries to exchange people, ideas and cultures. The goal is to involve individuals at all levels of U.S. society in citizen diplomacy in the hope that these people relations would help minimize the chance of future world conflicts.

Founded in 1956, Sister Cities International (SCI) is a nonprofit organization based in Washington DC which serves as the national membership organization for individual sister cities, counties, and states across the U.S. It serves as a center for best practices in the field of citizen diplomacy. Its role is to strengthen the sister cities network through programming and support for its members.

Created in 1983, the Richmond Sister Cities Commission (SCC) is the Richmond City’s official diplomatic liaison to their Twin Cities, to the Sister Cities International, and to all other local Sister Cities around the nation and world.

In Richmond, citizen diplomacy as a municipal commission is overseen and supported by the Richmond City Council. Richmond Sister Cities Commission works collaboratively with the Mayor’s Office, local area community activists, and professional association partners to encourage citizens to develop mutual understanding through cultural, educational, commercial, and humanitarian exchanges.

Thus, individual volunteer citizens (Commissioners and Commissioners at Large) and professional partner associations are the major life source of the program as they selflessly devote their energy and resources to enrich their city, further integrating such concepts of cultural diversity, equity, and inclusion to Richmond City.

Richmond maintains the following active and renewed Sister City

relationships: *1. From 1938-Present: Active Relationships:*

- Richmond upon Thames, England (Western Europe), Est. 1938
- Saitama City, Japan (South - East Asia), Est. 1993

- Zhengzhou, China (North - Asia), Est. 1994
- Olsztyn, Poland (Eastern Europe), Est. 1994 * Renewed 2021
- Windhoek, Namibia (West Africa), Est. 1998
- Segou, Republic of Mali (West Africa), Est. 2009

Part 2: Program Priorities & Strategic Plan

Activities took place with five of our six Sister Cities: (1) Olsztyn, Poland; (2) Saitama, Japan; (3) Zhengzhou, China; (4) Ségou, Mali; and (5) Windhoek, Namibia. Special efforts were made to promote the awareness of activities of the Commission, as country reports below will indicate. All Sister Cities Committees advanced the Commission's goal of strengthening our sister cities partnerships as well as increased our visibility in the community in 2023.

Enhancing our visibility and our role in the City was a primary area of focus in 2023. To that end, the Richmond Sister Cities Commission has been actively posting updated and meeting announcement to its Facebook page and Friends of Sister Cities Facebook page. We have also shared the same information via our email/ newsletter that comes out monthly.

We strive to spotlight and celebrate the increasingly diverse character of our region's growing population. We seek to continuously strengthen our multicultural, multiethnic, and multinational community and elevate its profile, both inwardly and outwardly, as a defining feature of the Greater Richmond area. We aim to provide the platform that connects individuals and entities seeking to experience, grow from, and contribute to the region's burgeoning internationalization.

Finally, the Sister Cities Commission has seen significant turn-over in its membership, with four of our thirteen members leaving the Commission in 2023. However, with four recent appointments of new Commissioners, the Commission now is at full strength going into 2024. These changes have challenged the Commission to focus on team-building and developing a shared vision on how to advance our mission and message to the community. The Commission will schedule a follow-up strategic planning retreat for early 2024 to on-board our new Commissioners and further refine our priorities and goals for moving forward.

SCC Priorities:

- A. The main priorities of the Richmond Sister Cities Commission in 2023 and beyond are to continue to stay sustainable and expand our programming and activities.
- B. In 2023, citizen diplomats of the Richmond Sister Cities Commission continue to be successful in establishing and maintaining productive (and symbolic) relationships with our Twin Cities.
- C. Collectively Commission members in FY 2023 alone have more than 500 years of experience working with building international relationships with cities across continents. Yet, like most all other cities, given shrinking budgets, the Commission must leverage the already scarce resources to remain sustainable and grow.
- D. And as growth can only occur through extensive outreach, local activism, and shared goal, in 2024 and beyond we have a great opportunity here in Richmond to reflect and identify new means to educate local, regional, and state decision makers about the measurable reciprocities that derive from citizen diplomacy.
- E. Thus the strategic priorities and goals of our Commission in 2023 and beyond is to think outside the box, leverage technology, and identify new solutions to promote the concrete benefits that derive from citizen diplomacy to the Greater Richmond region.
- F. Only when we succeed to effectively communicate this value proposition (that we can help create concrete economic and social growth) to regional leaders from across all the commercial, cultural, educational, and other key sectors of society that we can win their support for citizen diplomacy initiatives.
- G. We are currently maximizing our digital innovations by conducting both virtual and on site global community outreach activities, sharing values with our partners and social media network followers, and growing our local and international partnerships.
- H. We continue to see the need for procuring more formal Sister Cities landmark signage throughout the City. We even imagine establishing permanent signage at the Richmond International Airport, for a powerful SCC programming impact as we welcome visitors from around the world.

The program can easily be a fully funded program by the City with fully staff office to offer professional assistance to the Commission.

It was suggested in several monthly SCC Meetings by the SCC Chairman that this function

would normally reside from a city's Mayor Office as it encompasses international government and community affairs activities as volunteer citizens' time, resources, connections are limited and global strategic planning, human resources planning, event hosting, public affairs management, political protocols execution, procurement of products and services on behalf of the City, and economic development are all professional functions to be executed by most all municipality, not by volunteer citizens like in Richmond.

Part 3: Commission Membership for January- December 2023

Prefix	Last Name	First Name and Status	Position
Dr.	Cummins	Patricia, Professional	Commissioner & Vice Chair
Mr.	Hill	Hwan, Professional	Commissioner (Ended term Oct. 2023)
Atty	Lisk	Thomas, Professional	Commissioner (Ended term July 2023)
Atty	Bullard	Aisha, Professional	Commissioner & Secretary
Ms.	Ra-El	Nin Aseeya, Entrepreneur	Commissioner & Chair
Mr	Timmons	Ronald, Professional	Commissioner (Resigned Nov. 2023)
Ms.	Tran	My Lan, Professional	Commissioner (Ended term July 2023)
Ms.	Condrey	Julianne, Entrepreneur	Commissioner
Mr.	Henderson	Marcus	Commissioner
Mr.	Shuman	Nicolai	Commissioner & Treasurer
Dr.	Meng	Kejie, Professional	Commissioner
Hon	Lambert	Ann-Francel, City Council Lady	Commissioner
Ms.	Wakabongo	Masau, Professional	Commissioner (Start Sept. 2023)
Dr.	Zhao	Ruoxia, Professional	Commissioner (Start Sept. 2023)

Mrs.	Meade Barley	Jonette, Professional	Commissioner (Start Sept. 2023)
Dr.	Blondin	Jill, Professional	Commissioner (Start Sept. 2023)

Part 4: Commission Meeting Dates in 2023

Richmond Sister Cities Commission met in person and virtually on the below dates:

January 4, February 1, March 1, April 5, May 3, June 7, July (Recess-no meeting), August 2, September 6, October 4, November 1, and December 2, 2023.

Part 5: Commission Meeting Minutes in 2023

All meeting Minutes are sent to the City Clerk Office via Electronic email.

Part 6: Commission By-Law Records in 2023

Most updated By-Laws is also on file at the Clerk Office.

Part 7: Commissioners Attendance

Commissoners Attendance	<u>J</u>	<u>F</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>A</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>J</u>	<u>J</u>	<u>A</u>	<u>S</u>	<u>O</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>D</u>
Patricia Cummins	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Hwan Hill	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y		Y	Y	Y		
Tom Lisk	Y	Y	N	Y	N	N						
Aisha Bullard	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y	N
Nin Aseeya Ra-El	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Tim Timmons	Y	N	Y	N	N	N		N	N	N	N	
My Lan Tran	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y						
Julianne Condrey	N	N	N	Y	N	Y		N	N	N	N	N
Marcus Henderson	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y		Y	N	Y	Y	N
Nicolai Shuman	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	N		N	Y	Y	Y	Y

Kejie Meng	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y		Y	N	N	Y	Y
Ann-Frances Lambert	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N		Y	Y	N	N	Y
Musau Wakabongo										Y	Y	Y
Ruoxai Zhao										Y	Y	Y
Jonette Meade Barley										Y	N	N
Jill Blondin										N	Y	N

KEY: Y=Present/ N=Absent/ =Meeting not required

Part 8: Budget and Finances Reporting

Overall current year Budget: Commission Budget and Expenditures

Budget:

- A. The Richmond Sister Cities Commission received a budget of \$30,000 for FY 2022-2023.
- B. At the end of FY 2022-2023, Treasurer Nicolai reports \$20,581.69 was spent and \$9,418.31 remained.
- C. Travel to Sister Cities events in Olsztyn, Poland and Cape Town, South Africa accounted for \$12,568 (61%) of funds spent.
- D. The annual Young Author & Artist showcase accounted for the \$2,550 (12.39%) of funds spent
- E. Sponsored Events in Richmond accounted for \$1,923 (9.35%) of funds spent
- F. Two city sub commissions (Richmond upon Thames, England & Saitama, Japan) did not account for any expenditures in FY 2023.
- G. FY 2023-2024, the Richmond Sister Cities Commission received a budget of \$30,000 of which \$6843 has been spent and \$23,157 has been projected to current projects

Funding Benefits:

Funding has allowed Richmond Sister Cities to implement citizens-run global diplomacy (Including cultural- economic/trade and investment activities generated by relationships developed in six countries: China (Zhengzhou), Japan (Saitama), Namibia (Windhoek), The

United Kingdom (Richmond Upon Thames), and Mali (Ségou) from four (4) continents (Asia Europe- Africa- North America).

As in 2022 we are reviving relationship with our existing diplomatic relationship with our Twin City in Poland (with Olsztyn City) in Central Europe.

Thanks to FY 2023 City funding, the Commission was able to use our newly developed marketing materials, website and equipment to advance our ambitious plan to strengthen and expand existing global relationships with more than one city in Asia and/or Latin America.

Our outreach activities with various ethnic community members from Africa, Asia, and Latin America has also allowed us to outreach and connect directly with multi-ethnic students attending the Richmond Public Schools.

Part 8: Richmond Sister Cities Accomplishments and Community Partnership

A. RICHMOND UPON THAMES (ENGLAND): (Commissioner: Vacant)

Due to COVID-19, Richmond upon Thames has rescheduled its Twinning 2020 Event to celebrate Richmond upon Thames sister city relationships with its world partners, including Richmond, VA, Fontainebleau, France and Konstanz, Germany, and to reaffirm its relationships with each partner city.

Originally scheduled for June 26-28, 2020, this event is now scheduled for June 6-8, 2025. The Mayor of Richmond, Virginia will be invited to attend this event.

The Richmond Sister Cities Commission has invited Richmond upon Thames to participate in the 2023 Annual Young Artists and Authors Showcase (YAAS), sponsored by Sister Cities International. The 2023 YAAS theme was “Food Security in your Community.”

SAITAMA, JAPAN (Commissioner Tim Timmons)

- The Little League Baseball team did not coming to Richmond this year but instead went to Pittsburgh.
- The Commission also welcomed and heard from two RPS teachers Elizabeth Wat and Arianna Trickey who visited Saitama in connection with the exchange relationship. They spent two weeks and stayed with host families. While there they visited schools, mostly elementary and spent time with global studies teachers in English classes. As an educational tech coordinator, Ms. Wat is excited to bring back new ideas. Stressing global collaborations is a key takeaway. They also are considering ongoing opportunities where students will record asynchronous messages back and forth. The guests noted that teacher collaboration seemed to be emphasized such as having workrooms for teachers to talk and plan together, administrators seemed easily accessible, not a lot of silos. There also seemed to be a level of shared responsibility with the students. They get more breaks and the kids seemed to have some increased level of 2 responsibility. Catherine shared that RPS was wonderful in their collaboration, including picking up the airfare. A third teacher also attended. There was a lot of interest in the opportunity; 37 applications among interested teachers.
- The Committee look forward to adding new members, volunteers in order to restart these programs, increasing our outreach, and reestablishing connections with some of our partners.
- One proposed future project is to collect recipes of favorite local delights from all our Sister Cities partners and publish a cookbook. This could lead to a possible exchange based on culinary interests between our cities, and in doing so build community.

B. ZHENGZHOU, CHINA (Commissioner Kejie Meng)

- In Program Year 2022-2023, diplomatic relations between Richmond and Zhengzhou continues to move forward in positive notes despite a period of lack of correspondence from Zhengzhou due to the Country 's slowdown in economy and also due to our Twin City's yearly administrative and government changes.
- But in Richmond, there was continuous community interest in the educational and cultural development activities between the two cities.
- As of Spring 2023, The idea on a connection between VMFA and Zhengzhou was delayed and will be revisited once our Twin City is ready to embark in new cultural global partnerships in Richmond.
- Also: When the difficult economies become more friendly globally, and when the US Sino relationship improves at a global and national levels, the Richmond Zhengzhou Committee will make plans to expand on the educational front, in the spirit of fostering deeper relationship between Chinese Americans and Zhengzhou community in the spirit of Sister Cities connections.
- In Richmond, Zhengzhou Committee member Kejie Meng participated in the state Virginia

Asian Foundation 's 12th Annual Leadership Awards Gala in Richmond, among two other Commissioners taking part in the annual celebration of Asian American communities of which Chinese community is one of the four (4) largest Asian communities in Greater Richmond, playing a significant Asian cultural heritage contribution and important economic development force in and for the Greater Richmond region as a vibrant global location and community.

- During a festive ceremony at City Hall with local Chinese community and Richmond area Chinese American parents present in June 2023, four (4) awards of scholarships of \$500 each were offered to Chinese students attending local Richmond schools who are children of parents born in Zhengzhou or Henan province, for a total of \$2,000, which went directly to the students.
- Meanwhile this year Zhengzhou local schools participated actively in the 2022 YAA Arts program with 12 Zhengzhou students receiving their 2022 YAA certificates from Sister Cities International and Richmond Sister Cities Commission.

C. OLSZTYN, POLAND (Commissioner Julianne Condrey)

The Olsztyn Committee has been actively revitalizing the previously dormant relationship with Olsztyn, Poland. With a renewed agreement signed in early 2021, the communications have been exciting and persistent, despite the pandemic years. The October 2021 gala celebrating the renewal of the agreement featured the Ambassador of Poland to the U.S., as well as state and city elected officials, including the Mayor of Richmond, members of the House of Delegates, and state and regional tourism and economic development officials. The event incorporated innovative, external fundraising initiatives through our Friends of Richmond Sister Cities in order to expand the reach of the partnership, bringing in people who typically had not participated in Richmond Sister Cities events. The inaugural trip to celebrate the renewed partnership was delayed until May of 2023, due to the pandemic as well as the Ukraine war, in which the Poles were essential in addressing the needs of Ukrainian refugees, etc. This trip was a huge success in establishing a strong partnership, with goals to interface in the areas of education, business, and culture.

May 2023 Inaugural Partnership Trip to Olsztyn Summary

Delegation Members:

Julianne Szyper (Condrey), Nicolai Shurman, Will Egen, Ewa Reedy, Melissa Terrell

- Interacted with four of Olsztyn's sister cities (Gelsenkirchen and Offenberg, Germany; Chateauroux, France; Lutsk, Ukraine).
- Private meeting with the Mayor (President) of Olsztyn, discussing key concerns and similarities

between the cities, with an emphasis on recycling, refuse disposal, and eco-friendly maintenance

- Attended a city council meeting and formal ceremony honoring recipients of civic awards
- Visited a high school in Olsztyn during a celebration of the unveiling of a mural created by artists in Olsztyn and their sister city Gelsenkirchen, Germany; watched a play about Copernicus performed by high school students ● Lunch at a local brewery/restaurant
- Attended art exhibit by local artist
- Toured local historic sites, including a castle where Copernicus lived and worked, several cathedrals - one of which has Copernicus' grave, where we had a formal presentation of flowers from each sister city.
- All 5 sister cities attended a formal dinner hosted by the President of Olsztyn, where each city delegation leader gave a speech about the importance of their sister city relationships. City officials, educators, and business owners attended. Regional cuisine and traditional Polish dancers were part of the evening. ● Goodbye dinner featured reenactors depicting medieval knights

Goals for the City Partnership:

- Education
 - Higher ed: Medical student exchanges, STEM major exchanges
 - K-12 student projects - mural, virtual meet and greet, create displays for other city to display, exchanges
 - K-12 students in STEM and robotics exchanges and projects
 - Teacher virtual exchange
- Business
 - Brewery exchange
 - Set up a VEDP and Greater Richmond Partnership virtual meetings with local businesses
- Culture
 - Artist highlights - have Olsztyn artists featured in Richmond, vice versa

D. WINDHOEK, NAMIBIA (Commissioner Nin Aseeya Ra-El)

- Commissioner Nin Aseeya Ra-El, attended the African Summit held by President Biden with 50 African leaders. The African Summit was held on December 13-15 in Washington, DC. The Summit focused on advancing two-way trade and investment partnership to bolster Africa's role in the global economy, scale innovation and entrepreneurship and drive advancements in key sectors. CEOs and private sector leadership from over 300 American and African companies convened with the Heads of Delegation to catalyze investment in critical sectors,
- The summit included new initiatives to increase US engagement with the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), as well as initiatives to boost the continent's recovery from COVID-19, bolster food security and promote investment in infrastructure, health and renewable energy projects, among other priorities.
- President Biden stated that, the summit will demonstrate the United States' enduring commitment to Africa and will underscore the importance of US-Africa relations and increased cooperation on shared global priorities.
- Nin Aseeya has been actively participating on the volunteer and planning committee for Sister Cities International Summit in Cape Town.
- Nin Aseeya escorted 114 Greater Richmond students and parents to Cape Town to participate in activities involving youth leadership, diplomacy, and STEM that was curated alongside the SCI Africa Summit. Donations were collected through local City of Richmond organizations for our participation in the SCI Mandela Day of Giving ceremony in the Langa Township.
- The donations collected included books, underwear, socks, toothpaste, tooth brushes, and clothes. There were over 3000 books donated towards the start of a library, over 1000 toothbrushes and toothpaste, over 700 pairs of socks, and underwear and several suitcases of clothes for donation to a local women's shelter.
- This was a very heartfelt experience indeed and we know the impact was felt by all.
- The SCI Africa Summit -Mandela Day of Giving was a huge Success. Special Thanks goes out to St. Christopher School, The Delicados, WB Orthodontist, Lincoln Financial Group, Henry Schein Dental, National Epicurean INC, BBGB Books, Vernon Johns Middle School, Walnut Hill Elementary, Lakemont Elementary and the AWESOME Mothers, Fathers, and extended family members of the Nubian Village Academy STEM Program for their unwavering support!!
- As a follow up to our SCI Africa Summit in Cape town, That's Us Tours of Cape Town, South Africa, were invited to the City of Richmond to explore tourism opportunities between the City of Richmond and Cape Town. Additionally, Art 180 has invited a Cape Town artist to do a four month residency in the City of Richmond this summer. Plans are in development for both initiatives.
- Commissioners were invited to welcome our South African Guests at our October 4th meeting as a follow up visit from the SCI Africa Summit. Commissioner Marcus Henderson and Catherine Nexsen attended along with 20 community members who travel with us to Cape Town. They were overwhelmed with the hospitality shown by the Richmond Community at

large. Councilwoman Lambert provided housing, Gary Flowers gave them a tour of Historic Jackson Ward, They attended the 2nd Street Festival, VMFA and I hosted the welcome party. They ended their time spent with a tour of Washington DC before departing back to Cape Town.

- Nin Aseeya Ra-El Attended a meeting at the Embassy of Namibia on Sept. 12, 2023 to discuss the economical progress and Trade Mission.
- In contact with 2 businesses that are interested in olive farming in Namibia as well as a skin care company interested in exploring developing products made from the clay that the Himba people use.
- There is an interest in developing tourism between our two cities.
- Many contacts reaching out regarding education Initiatives in workforce development and getting technology in the classroom using solar devices...however they have not been successful as the communication and follow up on the Namibia side
- We have on going exploration in the small mining industry. A large delegation travel to Namibia last year and are currently doing feasibility studies to explore taking projects forward.

E. SEGOU, MALI (Commissioner Pat Cummins)

1) In early February 2023 the Malian ambassador His Excellency Sékou Berthé was hosted on the VCU campus where he met with Provost Dr. Fotis Sotiropolis, Associate Vice Provost for International Initiatives Dr. Jill Blondin, Dean Naomi Boyd of the School of Business and Dean Catherine Ingrassia of the College of Humanities and Sciences. He expressed an interest in bringing to Richmond a delegation consisting of university presidents and high-level officials during the 2023-24 academic year, something that is still being addressed. There was a reception with a Malian meal at the end of the day, and welcome speeches by City Council President Michael Jones, Councilwoman and Commissioner Ann Frances Lambert, Virginia Friends of Mali President Lydie Alapini Sakponou, and Chair of the Ségou-Richmond Sister City Relationship Patricia Cummins.

2) The connections between the Dogon Indigo Centre and Richmond grew during 2023. Ambassador Berthé visited the VCU School of the Arts (SOTA) in both February and September, when he met with fashion design faculty and SOTA administrators. During Fall 2023, a student with a major in business with minors in French and in fashion merchandising worked with Commissioner Cummins and with faculty from the Department of Fashion Merchandising (SOTA) and the Department of Marketing (School of Business) to do a market study that will lead to creation of the website through which the Dogon Centre in Mali will sell directly to customers. Implementation is planned for 2024, and the student works closely with the head of the Dogon Centre, with Canadian filmmaker Erica Pomerance, and a faculty member in the School of Business campus of the University of Bamako. The website will be bilingual French and English. All three Malian representatives are members of the Ségou chapter of the Virginia Friends of Mali. The Dogon Center reported on its 2021-23 grant funding from the U.S. Embassy in Mali, and it has plans to apply for new funding in 2024.

3) The Virginia Friends of Mali's *Richmond Chiwara* newsletter continued in both French and English. It covered sister cities events and brought historical events and cultural presentations in both directions to residents of Mali and of Virginia. A request for Richmond Sister Cities Commission support to fund the free newsletter's online fees was requested in late spring, but funding was not approved. The monthly newsletter and special issues were developed in 2020 as a way to maintain contact and a virtual presence when there were fewer events for the public. The last issue will come out in December 2020. There is now an open access online archive available at: <https://us20.campaign-archive.com/home/?u=3fc13b3ee64508366fa23697c&id=e398f1452d>

4) We again increased YAAS participation in Ségou and our Ségou students obtained one international prize as well as seven prizes in the local YAAS competition. Virginia Friends of Mali facilitated the event with the Ségou chapter of the organization through their partnership with the Centre Culturel Koré, which distributes art supplies and provides meals for young artists. Our Commission funded the art supplies and meals.

5) We celebrated Mali Independence Day in a jointly sponsored event co-hosted by VCU and Virginia Friends of Mali. The Commission responded to the VFOM call for co-sponsors, and City Councilwoman Ann Frances Lambert welcomed the ambassador and invited guests. The event itself featured Ambassador Sékou Berthé, who addressed the entire audience in English as well as students studying French at the end of the event. At least 200 people attended the event, and a three-course Malian meal was served. Malian griot Cheikh Hamala Diabaté and his orchestra performed, and after a brief break when VCU students and the griot spoke about medieval Mali during dessert, following which the audience got up and danced.

5) The SISTER CITIES book about the Richmond-Ségou relationship continues to be read and represents a major outreach tool for RSCC. New commissioners now receive a copy of the book as part of their orientation.

6) SISTER RADIO as a project to promote women's voices in Ségou and Richmond has undergone restructuring, as the two founders of the group in Richmond are now working independently.

7) Richmond continued to be seen and admired in the Mali diaspora, in the Malian Embassy and with the Mali government and Ségou municipality.

8) Sister Cities International Africa Conference hosted the Sister Cities International annual meeting in Cape Town. RSCC's initiatives involving Mali were reported on by commission members who attended the event.

9) Richmond (VFoM) was pleased to receive several Malians during the year, but these were personal visits: the Segou large delegation visits stopped as of 2020 due to the pandemic; and the same was true in the other direction: certain members of VFoM visited Ségou but on a personal visit basis.

10) Business ties have been important for the Richmond-Ségou relationship. They were unable to travel to Morocco for the annual meeting of the Africa Business and Entrepreneurship Research Society, which we supported them to attend virtually in 2022, but there was no virtual option in 2023. However, Madani Sissoko, an active member of the Ségou chapter of Virginia Friends of Mali, has

become head of the Regional Business Council in Ségou and has expressed an interest in working on collaborative projects with Richmond.

11) The State Department continues to issue alerts on Mali. There has been violence in Mali, and the head of the Malian chapter of Virginia Friends of Mali, Kalifa Touré, lost 18 relatives when a boat they were riding in was attacked and sunk. Kalifa helped create a nonprofit to help victims of violence. He and other Malian VFOM members lament the fact that Mali had a new coup d'état this year with a resulting influence of Russian mercenaries. The French was asked to leave Mali by the new government, and there is massive unemployment and a lack of security.

12) Commissioner Patricia Cummins and her students engaged with retired university Rector Macki Samaké to exchange English and French conversations with Malian students. VCU alumna and Bamako employee of the U.S. Embassy Kadidia Samaké promoted ties between VCU and the embassy staff. She is currently on maternity leave upon the birth of her second child this fall.

Part 9: Special Project

THE LATIN SISTER CITY INITIATIVE (Commissioner Nin Aseeya Ra-El)

A. As initiated by former Commission/ Chair My Lan Tran in 2020, the Sister City Commission (SCC) launched a “Latin Sister City Feasibility Project” as a possible Twin City relationship between a Latin City and Richmond City.

B. Former SCC Commissioner Shirl Rhoades, a Public Schools educator with more than twenty years of experience working with Latino students and parents was nominated by the Commission to take on the responsibility and became Research Chair.

C. Her research activity began with a focus on the Latin cities that make up the largest percent of our Richmond City Public Schools population.

D. As a result of the data at the time, there were three countries that ranked at the top of this list of immigrant community members. Those countries were Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador.

E. In August 2023, we received a letter of interest from Delegate Elizabeth Guzman’s office with a request to start a Sister Cities relationship with the City of Arequipa, Peru. Hernan Teran is a Richmond city resident that is the point of contact that is willing to explore the relationship.

F. In July 2023, we received an official letter of interest from the Mayor of Almoloya, Mexico expressing interest in establishing a Sister Cities relationship with the City of Richmond. Karla Daniela Valdes Islas is the Almoloya representative who presented to the Commission in October 2023 to share the benefits of a possible relationship.

Part 10: Program Operations

A. SCC Email/ NEWSLETTER

- During the year of 2023, the Commission has sent out monthly emails/newsletter to update the community on regular activities using the mailchimp platform.
- Our Monthly Email/Newsletter cover stories about Commission project Commission 's events highlights, various Commissioner's biography with photos, and reporting on future activities.
- The publication is widely shared with our public social media platforms as well as community members who have elected to be on our email list..

B. ANNUAL SISTER CITIES YOUTH ART COMPETITION

- The Young Artists and Authors Showcase (YAAS) is an annual contest that encourages youth worldwide to express the mission of Sister Cities International through original artwork, literature, photography, and music for both original and reinterpreted pieces. • The Youth Art program theme this year is Food Security in your Community.
- International entries this year were received from Zhengzhou, China; Segou, Mali; and Windhoek, Namibia.
- Submissions are centered around an annual theme and judged based on originality, composition, and theme interpretation.
- Selected Grand Prize Winners in each category (art, articles, poetry, photography, original music, and reinterpreted music) win a \$1000 prize.

Part 11: Community Partnership and Collaboration

The Commission continued to outreach to the below organizations:

1. Virginia Hispanic Chamber of Commerce
2. Richmond Schools System (Multicultural, Hispanic PTA, ESL Program and beyond)
3. Richmond Public Library
4. US China Friendship Association
5. Virginia Friends of Mali
6. Virginia Asian Chamber of Commerce
7. Virginia Asian Foundation
8. Japan Virginia Society
9. Selected Embassies from Asia-Europe-Africa-Latin America
10. Organization of Chinese Americans
11. Richmond Chinese School
12. United Chinese
13. Virginia Economic Development Partnership
14. Greater Richmond Partnership
15. Virginia Commonwealth University (Various departments)

16. Richmond Korean American Society
17. Local African residents and community
18. Local Polish community civic group
19. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts
20. NVA STEM National Society of Black Engineers

Part 12: Conclusion: Challenges and Opportunities & Proposed Suggestions to Council

CHALLENGES-OPPORTUNITIES:

- Despite our many successes, the bigger picture as we envision is the issue of program's long-term sustainability.
 - As most regions focus on studying growth for their region using data research on the regional level, less research attention has been given to evaluating the benefits of the sister city partnerships model so they can better appreciate how cities with diverse capabilities and needs can jointly enhance the maximum potential for economic growth.
- In addition, given the ever-shrinking budgets most cities must leverage existing scarce resources to remain sustainable. Yet sustainable development and opportunities lay on a need to have full time / dedicated staffing coming from the government as volunteers' energy will max out at some point.

PROPOSED SUGGESTIONS TO COUNCIL:

- Still, the year of 2023 represents an immense opportunity for the Richmond Sister Cities Commission and to the City government to prove that with the right organizational leadership, a clear vision and direction, and intentional strategic planning, Richmond city can promote with confidence to the world that Richmond city is a city "in- the-move" a global competitive city with promising future, and a friendly place to visit, play, raise a family, and do business.
- With our beginning 2023 immediate SCC success story and thinking out of the box and beyond the original "People to People" friendship idea promoted by Sister Cities International: More than ever the City of Richmond government needs to offer its resident tax payers (represented symbolically by its Richmond Sister Cities Commission) and current and prospective domestic and global investors the adequate full time staffing

resources and funding (such as creating more SIGNAGE posts about SCC Program throughout the city, massive global marketing campaigns etc...) allowing it to implement a full time – professional international relations program if it wishes to transform Richmond City from a Tier 2 City to a Tier 1 City that's ready to compete comfortably with other cities with similar industries and cultural advantages such as Austin, Forth Worth, Texas, or San Francisco, Northern California, among a dozen other cities, which have brought international recognition to its community through a full time professional international diplomacy implementation.

End of report