



ANNUAL REPORT PROGRAM YEAR 2024

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(RSCC Secretary Richmond, Virginia)

December 30, 2024

Richmond
Sister Cities
Commission
(RSCC)



Richmond Sister Cities Commission ANNUAL REPORT 2024



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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Richmond Sister Cities Commission (RSCC) made significant strides in fostering international partnerships, cultural exchanges, and community engagement in 2024. Highlights include successful educational and cultural exchanges with five Sister Cities, increased visibility through digital outreach, and impactful community events. Despite resource constraints, RSCC demonstrated its ability to deliver value and strengthen ties across continents. This report outlines accomplishments, challenges, and proposed strategies to ensure sustainable growth.

2. 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 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:*



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- Richmond upon Thames, England (Western Europe), Est. 1938 - Vacant (Emeritus Status)
- 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

3. 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 increasing our visibility in the community in 2024.

Enhancing our visibility and our role in the city was a primary area of focus in 2024. To that end, the Richmond Sister Cities Commission has been actively posting updated and meeting announcements 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.

In 2024, The Commission is at full strength with new members coming on board. The commission will continue focusing on team building and developing a shared vision on how to advance our mission and message to the community. The Commission is planning to schedule a strategic planning retreat for new members in early 2025.

3.1 SCC Priorities:

- A. The main priorities of the Richmond Sister Cities Commission in 2024 and beyond are to continue to stay sustainable and expand our programming and activities.
- B. In 2024, 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. Commission members in FY 2024 alone have more than 500 years of experience working with building international relationships with cities across continents. Yet, like most 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 goals, in 2025 and beyond we have a great opportunity here in Richmond to reflect and identify new



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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 2024 and beyond are 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 in effectively communicating 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 onsite 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 a fully staffed 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.

4. COMMISSION MEMBERSHIP FOR JANUARY- DECEMBER 2024

Table 1 Richmond Sister Cities Commissioners 2024

Prefix	Member Name	Position	Term	Commence	Terminate
Mr.	Stafford Armstead	Member at Large (Starting, August 2024)	First	02/12/2024	01/09/2027
Dr.	Jill Blondin	Member	First	10/25/2023	10/24/2026



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Prefix	Member Name	Position	Term	Commence	Terminate
Ms.	Aisha Bullard, Esq	Secretary (until August 2024)	First	03/22/2022	3/21/2025
Dr.	Patricia W. Cummins	Vice President (until, August 2024); Chair, Segou, Mali	First	07/26/2023	07/25/2026
Mr.	Marcus Henderson	Member	First	11/14/2022	03/21/2025
Ms.	Ms. Jonette Meade Barley	(Vice President Starting, August 2024), Chair, Windhoek, Namibia starting, August 2024)	First	09/11/2023	07/25/2026
Dr.	Kejie Meng	Chair, Zhengzhou, China	Second	11/11/2023	11/10/2026
Ms.	Ms. Nin Aseeya Ra-El	Chair (August 2024); Chair Windhoek, Namibia until August 2024	Second	10/08/2021	10/07/2024 TERM LIMIT
Mr.	Mr. Nicolai Shuman	Treasurer until August 2024, Chair, Olsztyn, Poland	Second	9/10/2024	09/9/2027
Dr.	Musau WaKabongo	Secretary, starting August 2024	First	09/11/2023	11/28/2026
Dr.	Dr. Ruoxia Zhao	Treasurer, starting August 2024	First	09/11/2023	07/25/2026



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Prefix	Member Name	Position	Term	Commence	Terminate
Hon.	Councilwoman Ann-Frances Lambert	Member at Large until August 2024; Chair starting August 2024	First	1/04/2021	12/31/2024
Ms.	Ms. Linda Freeman		First	10/8/2024	10/7/2027
Mrs.	Catherine Nexsen	Chair, Saitama, Japan	First	10/8/2024	10/7/2027

5. COMMISSION MEETING DATES IN 2024

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

January 10, February 7, March 6, April 3, May 1, June 5, July (Recess-no meeting), August 7, September 4, October 2, November 6, and December 4, 2024

6. COMMISSION MEETING MINUTES IN 2024

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

7. COMMISSION BY-LAW RECORDS IN 2024

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

8. COMMISSIONERS' ATTENDANCE

Commissioners	J	F	M	A	M	J	J ***	A	S	O	N	D
Mr. Stafford Armstead****			X	X	-	X	-	X	X	X	X	X
Ms. Jonette Meade Barley	X	N	N	X	X	X	-	X	X	X	X	X
Dr. Jill Blondin	X	X	N	N	X	X	-	N	X	X	X	N
Ms. Aisha Bullard, esq	X	X	X	N	X	X	-	X	N	N	N	N



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Dr. Patricia Cummins	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	N	X	X	X	X
Ms. Linda Freeman*										X	X	X
Mr. Marcus Henderson	X	N	X	N	N	N	-	N	N	N	N	N
Hon. Ann-Frances Lambert	X	X	X	X	N	N	-	X	X	X	N	X
Dr. Kejie Meng	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	X	X	X	X	X
Ms. Catherine Nexsen**					X	X	-	X	X	X	N	N
Ms. Nin Aseeya Ra-El	X	X	N	X	X	X	-	X	X	X	N	X
Mr. Nicolai Shuman	N	X	X	X	X	X	-	X	X	X	X	N
Dr. Musau WaKabongo	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	X	X	X	X	X
Dr. Ruoxia Zhao	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	X	X	X	X	X

NOTE:

*Ms. Linda Freeman was appointed on September 13, 2024. Her official meeting attendance was in October 2024

** Mrs. Catherine Nexsen: was appointed on September 13, 2024. Her official meeting attendance was in October 2024. However, she continued coming to meetings voluntarily. She was the chair of Saitama, Japan for many years.

*** No meeting in July

**** Mr. Stafford Armstead was appointed in February 2024. His official meeting attendance started on February 12, 2024

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



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9. BUDGET AND FINANCES REPORTING

Overall current year Budget: Commission Budget and Expenditures

9.1 Budget:

- A. The Richmond Sister Cities Commission received a budget of \$30,000 for FY 2023-2024.
- B. At the end of FY 2023-2024, Treasurer Nicolai Shuman reports \$26,510.91 was spent and \$3,489.09 remained.
- C. FY 2024-2025, the Richmond Sister Cities Commission received a budget of \$30,000 of which \$30,000 has been projected to current projects

Table 2 Reported in November 2024 by Treasurer, Dr. Ruoxia Zhao

Expense Tracker:

Richmond (UK): \$3,000.00 remaining

Saitama (Japan): \$3,000.00-cost for banner remaining

Olsztyn (Poland): \$3,000.00 remaining

Windhoek (Namibia): \$3,000.00 remaining

Zhengzhou (China): \$441.43 remaining

Segou (Mali): \$1762.22 remaining

SSC General Fund: \$4,167.57 remaining

9.2 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), Olsztyn (Poland), and Mali (Ségou) from four (4) continents (Asia Europe- Africa- North America).

Thanks to FY 2024 City funding, the Commission was able to use our newly developed marketing materials, website and sponsorships 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



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have also allowed us to outreach and connect directly with multi-ethnic students attending the Richmond Public Schools.

10. RICHMOND SISTER CITIES ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP

A. RICHMOND UPON THAMES (ENGLAND): (Commissioner: Vacant - Emeritus Status)

B. SAITAMA, JAPAN (Commissioner Tim Timmons, resigned, however, Mrs. Catherine Nexsen continued with the activities. She was reappointed as a Commissioner on September 13, 2024.

- In November 2024, Mrs. Nexsen and her husband, Mr. Vincent Linthicum arrived in Japan on International sports day. They were met at the airport by a friend of Catherine's. Catherine had asked to see some events when she arrived, and many events were arranged by her contacts and friends.
 - They were able to see young sumo wrestlers practicing. They were very young, but the contact was very powerful and impressive.
 - Next, they were welcomed in Urawa by the international tourism and sister cities committee. They were informed of the 30th anniversary presentation for baseball. They met a committee member who hosted one of the teachers in the past with a homestay. The homestay program for both teachers and baseball has been highly successful over these past 30 years.
 - They met with the Mayor and exchanged gifts from Mr. and Mrs. Linthicum. They encouraged Saitama to attend the sister cities international conference in Osaka in September of 2025 in addition to the Osaka expo. Sister cities international is preparing a book of sister city relationships between Japan and America and the book will be prepared in both languages. They discussed the upcoming teacher exchange next month between our two cities. They also told everyone that they were looking forward to the baseball teams coming to Richmond, VA in 2025. Also, additional Sister City affiliation was encouraged and discussed.
 - They were introduced to the school board and were able to observe the classroom in a school. They were very impressed with the students' discipline and intent on learning.
 - They were also able to observe the progress that Japan has made with its transportation system and the growth of the country
 - The Little League Baseball team did not come to Richmond this year but instead went to Pittsburgh.
- Teacher Exchange: Monday November 18, 1000, hours at 2020 Westwood Avenue, Richmond, Virginia to the welcome brunch for 2024 Teacher Exchange. Two teachers from Saitama, Japan visited Richmond. They were welcomed by the Richmond Sister Cities Commissionaires and other dignitaries.
 - The Commission also welcomed and heard from two RPS teachers Elizabeth Wait 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. Wait 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



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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 seem 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 looks 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.

C. ZHENGZHOU, CHINA (Commissioner Dr. Kejie Meng)

Zhengzhou-Richmond Sister Cities: Outreach local Communities

- Richmond Sister Cities Commission (RSCC) became the Bronze Sponsor of OCA -CVC (Organization of Chinese American Center Virginia Chapter).
 - Kejie Meng and Ruoxia Zhao joined the New Year Celebration event organized by OCA-CVC.
 - Promoted RSCC and got more people signed up to receive RSCC/SCI newsletters.
- March 3rd, Zhengzhou delegation came to Richmond and held China (Zhengzhou)-US (Richmond) Culture and Tourism Promotion Conference, it was a great success and a very encouraging event.
 - Ruoxia Zhao and Kejie Meng, volunteers from OCA-CVC, planned this event within 3 weeks to get everything done.
 - Patricia Cummins and Ann-Frances Lambert were keynote addresses.
 - VIP guests from RSCC, US China People's Friendship Association, The City of Richmond, City Council, Haleon, Central Virginia Chinese School, Richmond Ballet Artistic Director, Richmond Region Tourism, Bondable Biopolymers LLC. Etc.
 - ~300 people participated in this event.
 - During the social event, we made sure each invited guest had a chance to talk to related people to make connections. We hope More projects between Zhengzhou and Richmond will happen in the near future.
 - Gifts exchange to Zhengzhou delegation
- Successfully completed March 24th event in collaboration with Chinese Scholars and Students Association: Chinese Spring Celebration
 - Student scholarship program—scholarship ceremony
 - Ann-Frances Lambert and Patricia Cummins were keynote addresses
 - Has traditional Chinese games, Chinese cuisine, hands-on experiences in calligraphy, paper cutting, and crafting your very own lucky bracelet.



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- ~200 people participated in this event. A big promotion of RSCC through VCU
- Connected VCU professors, will help them to connect with universities in Zhengzhou
- Ruoxia traveled back to China. She gave the award and gift to Kunli Zhang to recognize her outstanding contributions to strengthening Zhengzhou-Richmond Sister Cities Relationships.
- The sixth US-China Sister Cities Summit was held from July 18-19 in Tacoma, Washington, aiming to deepen friendships and enhance local-level exchanges between the two nations.
 - The summit, titled "Shared Visions for a Brighter Future," was co-sponsored by the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries and Sister Cities International, a nonprofit organization supporting sister city affiliations across the US. The event included panel discussions, keynote speeches, and case studies, bringing together over 140 representatives from 14 Chinese provinces and more than 100 representatives from 21 US states to discuss shared opportunities and address common challenges.
 - Dr. Kejie Meng, Chair of Zhengzhou-Richmond Sister Cities and Dr. Ruoxia Zhao, treasurer of Richmond Sister Cities Commission, joined this conference. They had a meeting with Diana Greer, President of US-China Friendship Association, Fred Blanton, Virginia representative, and 5 delegations from Zhengzhou, Henan province. They emphasized the significance of sister city relationships in fostering mutual understanding and collaboration and had gift exchanges. This conference highlighted the future potential of the sister city conferences to serve as bridges enhancing mutual trust, strengthening friendships, and deepening cooperation between local governments.
- China is inviting 50,000 young Americans to China on exchange and study programs in the next five years. China has a YES program — the Young Envoys Scholarship, and encourages diverse forms of cooperation, such as exchange programs between schools, short visits, summer schools and winter camps. It is a great opportunity for RSCC since Zhengzhou and Richmond are sister cities.

Ongoing project:

- Start the Richmond Ballet 2nd China Tour Proposal
China tour planning. Ruoxia and Kejie Meng had an online meeting with Cong Ma, Jennifer and Hannah from the Richmond Ballet on Oct 1st, 12-1pm and a following meeting with key contact from Zhengzhou on Dec 20h. The proposed tour time is Summer 2027. Kejie Meng will contact Zhengzhou key contact for an invitation letter. The Richmond ballet and RSCC will contact the China Embassy to get involved.
- Working with Richmond Public Schools (RPS) to set up sister schools from Zhengzhou
 - Kejie Meng and Ruoxia Zhao has been in contact with Danielle Greene-Bell, Chief Engagement Officer from RPS to work on details of two cities school collaborations.
 - Sias university, (college level) already shared summer and winter camps details. (key contact: Yuejun Liang, yuejunliang@sias.edu.cn) Connecting with University of Richmond now. They are talking about the details. So far, China covers all students' costs in China, including their stay, insurance, traveling, Chinese cultural and tourism programs. US students pay their ticket



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cost.

- Sias IS (international School, elementary) (Key contact: Sam Mills, head of school)
- Zhengzhou Zhengdong New District Foreign language middle school shows interest to create “Sister Schools” relationships. (Key contact: Kunli Zhang)

D. OLSZTYN, POLAND (Commissioner Mr. Nicolai Shuman)

The Olsztyn Committee is waiting on confirmation of a meeting time with Nannette Bailey, Richmond Public Schools (RPS) Community Partnerships Coordinator. An additional attempt will be made to contact RPS, with an alternative plan to pursue partnerships with Richmond area Independent Schools under consideration. Olsztyn is eager to pursue a school exchange / collaboration and securing a Richmond area partner is a top priority.

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

- Nin Aseeya Ra-El will be transitioning from the Commission in October 2024; Jonette Meade Barley will be the next chair.
- 17 students from Windhoek participated in a competition for 6 weeks in the US, Mandela Washington Fellowship. The Mandela Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders is the flagship program of the U.S. Government’s Young African Leaders Initiative.
- Nin participated in a webinar in late June 2024 that introduced Namibian Youth to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in Virginia
- The president of Namibia, Hage Geingob died on February 4, 2024.
- General elections are due to be held on November 27, 2024.

F. SEGOU, MALI (Commissioner Dr. Patricia Cummins)

In October 2024, we had three delegations from Mali visiting Richmond.

Dogon Indigo Center

- **October 2**

The Dogon Indigo Center was represented by entrepreneurs Mamoudou Nango and his wife and documentary film producer Erica Pomerance. They had participated in the Richmond Folk Festival at the end of September and were given a reception during the Richmond Sister Cities Commission meeting on October 2, 2024. Attending the October 2024 meeting was a Moroccan guest, Dr. Houssine Soussi, who will be hosting the Dogon Indigo Center as part of the planned Symposium on African Textiles, to be held in Morocco in November 2025. (Funding of \$300 had been approved at the Sept. 2024 meeting specifically to host this reception. It came in under budget.) Following the event, the Dogon delegation went to dinner with Commissioner Cummins, Fulbright scholar Dr. Soussi, and Maryland designer Brenda Winstead, who participated in indigo workshops with the Dogon entrepreneurs.

At the Oct. 2 meeting, Commission Chair Lambert gave them a Commission gift on behalf of the



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City of Richmond, and Ségou-Richmond Committee Chair Cummins gave them the book-length history of the Ségou-Richmond relationship and the children's book *Djita*, which recounts the life of a Malian girl in Richmond in both English and French. The Commission approved funding for an added \$1500 for meals and events that were hosted or co-hosted by the Sister Cities Commission for both the Dogon Indigo Center and the second Mali delegation consisting of Sister Cities representatives Madani Sissoko (Ségou Business Council) and Moumouni Temu (energy company representative), who appeared jointly at three events involving the Dogon Indigo Center.

- **October 3**

On Oct. 3, at the Quirk Hotel, which provided three days of lodging for the delegation, Commissioner Cummins served as a co-host for a reception that included both commissioners and community members who had been holding meetings with the Dogon delegation.

- **October 8 and October 10**

The Dogon delegation and the Ségou business leaders held joint events on the VCU campus and in the community. These included dyeing workshops both on campus and in the community, as well as participation in French, fashion design, and African American Studies classes as well as visits to professional groups and to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. Commissioner Cummins facilitated two sets of events at VCU and hosted two lunches at the Panera Bread locations next to campus on both Oct. 8 and Oct. 10. On the evening of October 8, Commissioner Cummins also hosted both Malian delegations as well as Virginia Friends of Mali members who had provided lodging during their stays in Richmond. These included the Cameron Robinson family, the Ana Edwards family, and the Brahim Kone family.

- **October 15**

Commissioner Cummins hosted members of the Virginia Friends of Mali and other community members who had not participated in the October 8 dinner. Plans were made for the return of the Dogon Indigo Center entrepreneurs during the 2025 Richmond Folk Festival, and plans were made for their participation in the next Symposium on African Textiles. Faculty and students from three VCU departments are also planning to participate in the November 2025 symposium.

- **October 18-25**

- The deputy director of the Education USA division at the U.S. Embassy in Bamako was accompanied by her husband, a Malian IT executive. Kadidia Samaké is a 2017 graduate of VCU, and she talked on campus about her book about her four years at VCU in which she gives advice to other Africans about what to expect when they arrive in the United States to pursue an American degree. Their 7-year-old son was born in Richmond shortly after his mother's graduation, and he participated in events with his parents last month. He received a copy of the Virginia Friends of Mali's *Djita* book, and his parents received a copy of the book on the history of the Richmond-Ségou partnership. Commissioner Cummins provided them with transportation to Kings Dominion on October 20, and she hosted them for lunch at Panera Bread on October 21.



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- Kadidia is planning a new book focused on Malian culture with an emphasis on practices and perspectives. She left another copy of her last book with the international office at VCU, with whom she works in her current job in the U.S. Embassy.

11. SPECIAL PROJECT

11.1 Dr. Musau WaKabongo – Community Outreach

64th Celebration of the Independence of the Democratic Republic of the Congo

Dinner fundraiser. *“Empowering and Equipping the Youth of Tomorrow”*

Richmond Sister Cities Commission (RSCC) sponsored a table at the celebration of the 64th Independence of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Dinner and Fundraiser to support life-changing initiatives for the 4-H program in Cibombo, DRC. The Honorable Ann-Francis Lambert delivered greetings on behalf of the RSCC.

The sponsoring of the 4-H program in Cibombo fosters problem-solving skills, promotes health prevention, and funding a new computer training center for students.

Date: July 13, 2024, | Time: 5:30 pm to 9:30pm Location: Acca Shriners Center, 1712 Bellevue Avenue, Richmond, Virginia 23227

11.2 ¿Qué Pasa? Festival

Richmond Sister Cities Commission attended 23th annual ¿Qué Pasa? Festival of Virginia-by-Virginia Hispanic Chamber of Commerce on May 4, 2024 from 10:am to 6 pm. RSCC had a sponsorship to promote and got a lot of people to sign up for RSCC newsletters.

11.3 Sister Cities International All-American Summit

Four members of the Richmond Sister Cities Commission: Ms. Nin Aseeya Ra-El (chair), Dr. Musau WaKabongo, Ms. Jonette Meade Barley and Mr. Stafford Armstead Attended the 2024 Sister Cities International All Americans Summit in San Antonio, Texas from May 27 to June 1, 2024.

11.4 Virginia State -wide Sister Cities Meeting

November 16, 2024, Charlottesville, VA. Time: 10:00 am to 3 pm. Location: The UVA Equity Center, 201 W. Main St. Suite 3 Charlottesville, VA 22902

The following Richmond Sister Cities Commissionaires attended the meeting in person:

1. Ms. Jonette Meade Barley (Vice Chair)
2. Dr. Musau WaKabongo (Secretary)
3. Dr. Ruoxia Zhao (Treasurer)



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4. Dr. Kejie Meng (Chair, Zhengzhou China)
5. Ms. Linda Freeman
6. Mr. Stafford Armstead (member at large)

Dr. Meng gave a summary presentation of the Richmond Sister Cities Commission Activities Reports.

11.5 14th Annual Virginia Asian Chamber Gala

8 Commissioners attended Virginia Asian Chamber Gala on December 4th, Time: 5:00 pm to 8:30 pm. Location: The Jefferson Hotel, Richmond, VA. RSCC also has a sponsorship table to promote RSCC.

12. PROGRAM OPERATIONS

A. SCC Email/ NEWSLETTER

- During the year of 2024, 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 biographies 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.
- Former Chair, Nin Aseeya Ra-El applied and won a \$5000 grant for the YAAS program 2024-2025 program year. Funds are in the custody of Friends of Mali on RSCC's behalf.

13. COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP AND COLLABORATION

The Commission continued to reach out to the organizations below:

1. Virginia Hispanic Chamber of Commerce
2. Richmond Schools System (Multicultural, Hispanic PTA, ESL Program and beyond) 3. Richmond Public Library
3. US China Friendship Association
4. Virginia Friends of Mali
5. Virginia Asian Chamber of Commerce



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6. Virginia Asian Foundation
7. Japan Virginia Society
8. Selected Embassies from Asia-Europe-Africa-Latin America
9. Organization of Chinese Americans
10. Richmond Chinese School
11. United Chinese
12. Virginia Economic Development Partnership
13. Greater Richmond Partnership
14. Virginia Commonwealth University (Various departments)
15. Richmond Korean American Society
16. Local African residents and community - Richmond members of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC),
17. Local Polish community civic group
18. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts
19. NVA STEM National Society of Black Engineers

14. CONCLUSION: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES & PROPOSED SUGGESTIONS TO COUNCIL

14.1 Challenges-Opportunities:

- Despite our many successes, the bigger picture 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.

14.2 Proposed Suggestions to Council:

- Still, the year of 2024 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 2024 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



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ever the City of Richmond government needs to offer its resident taxpayers (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, Fort 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.

15. STRATEGIC GOALS FOR 2025 AND BEYOND

- **Expand Programming:** Engage more diverse demographics, including youth and underrepresented groups, in cultural and educational exchanges.
- **Enhance Visibility:** Install permanent Sister Cities signage at prominent locations such as the Richmond International Airport to increase public awareness.
- **Strengthen Partnerships:** Foster new collaborations with cities in Latin America and Asia to broaden the commission’s reach.
- **Sustainability Initiatives:** Advocate for dedicated staffing and recurring funding to support long-term program growth.

16. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Richmond Sister Cities Commission extends its deepest gratitude to all those who contributed to a successful year in 2024. Special thanks are due to:

- **Commission Members:** For their tireless dedication and invaluable insights in advancing RSCC’s mission.
- **Volunteers and Community Partners:** For their enthusiastic participation and support in various programs and events.
- **City Council and Leadership:** For their continued commitment to fostering Richmond’s global connections.
- **Sponsors and Donors:** For their generous contributions that make our initiatives possible.

We also acknowledge the citizens of Richmond who engage with and support our mission, ensuring the success of cultural and educational exchanges that enrich our community.



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End of report