



Sisters unite

By Verne Krastins

Many sister cities exist on history alone – they are driven by nostalgia, and friendships you couldn't break in a fit for fear of upsetting the other party.]

The international sister city movement originated over 60 years ago in the wake of World War II. People were looking for better ways to run the world.

While its bedfellow, the United Nations, sought to bring nations closer, the movement saw international relationships between cities and communities as a more intimate road towards the same ideal – overcoming barriers of language, culture and ideology, and engendering respect and understanding between people.

Most countries these days have a peak sister city association. Ours is the Australian Sister Cities Association (ASCA), which celebrates a 25 year milestone on 29 September, the date the first ASCA executive was elected in Alice Springs in 1982.

Since then, ASCA has grown appreciably, but like other voluntary subscription based organisations, lack of funding and investment is restricting. A feature of the ASCA calendar is the annual conference

with this year's conference also enjoying a 25th birthday in Darwin to coincide with the anniversary.

Kinship contracts

The purest form of a sister city relationship is one based on a formal agreement, usually signed by respective mayors. This one feature has dominated the definition of sister cities, and for instance was one of ASCA's membership criteria until a few years ago, as is still the case in other countries. The flavour now is inclusive, acknowledging that there are many forms of community based international relations, not just municipal ones. This loosens things up, and recognises that sister cities are not about cities at all – they are about community, schools, economies and friendships, and the local council may or may not be a driving force in this respect.

A few statistics

A good guide to Australia's sister city activity is ASCA's membership. I analysed some of the information on ASCA's web site, and a few interesting trends came to light.

Firstly the basics. The number of member organisations on ASCA's books has doubled over the past 20 years (251 in 1987 to 476 in 2005). Not a spectacular growth rate, but if you accept that sister city relationships are a matter of long term commitments and quite an ask, a gradual growth is understandable.

The figure is bound to be over 500 now, taking into account growth in the past two years, and noting that not all sister cities are registered with ASCA, especially with a wider definition. There are also over 20 state affiliations and sister city agreements between Australian localities. The growth rate in ASCA membership has been stable over the past decade at around 14 new members per year (2005 figures).

While nostalgia and promoting world peace may be the origin of a lot of sister city relationships, economic development is now a most powerful motivator. That may explain China's place as the fastest growth region for Australian sister cities, gradually catching up to the numbers in Japan and the USA. China is also geographically the nearest emerging economic giant to Australia, which would explain why India hardly gets a mention in the sister city list.

The extended family

Why have a sister city at all, let alone four or five, like some councils do?

Many sister cities exist on history alone – they are driven by nostalgia, and friendships you couldn't break in a fit for fear of upsetting the other party.

Sister schools have seeded many a sister city relationship. The educational benefit is clear, but what makes sister school relationships sustainable is that they are integrated into the curriculum, they are funded, subsidised, and ongoing.

The language of sister cities uses words like friendship, learning and and cultural exchange to describe how any activity between the two distant communities is good. There are many examples around Australia of sister city programs creating occasions and initiatives which meet these ideals.

A shift in the past few years is that pragmatic reasons for a sister city relationship are very high on the agenda, in particular the hope that sister cities can deliver local economic development.

Of course, the economic driver has always been there, but anyone arguing for funds to set up or expand a sister city program, or just to send a delegation somewhere, economic development is not a bad pitch.

Almost yin to the yang, the sector of aid based inter-community relationships are in full swing, unfortunately because of the state of the world. These are the ones where the benefit is for the sister alone, not ourselves. No better example in Australia is the East Timor friendship movement where a large number of councils and their communities have struck agreements with villages and regions there since independence.

Sister workers

One area of sister city exchange that seems to be lagging is that of organisation-to-organisation, meaning council organisations.

This might manifest itself as staff and professional development exchanges, sharing of information with regard to council services, and even to the extent of respective management cultures learning from each other. After all, if there is any indicator of a nation's culture, it can be seen in the underlying ground rules for how workforces are managed in those countries.

As it is, sister city arrangements rarely involve council staff, even though such involvement could be a direct input into staff development and recognition programs. It could make the workforce feel good about itself to know you could be going to Japan, China or the USA sometime.

Who's driving?

There are two drivers, and they usually share the wheel.

One is the community driving the sister city program, with a local sister city association operating like other community groups. The local council usually supports these associations and adopts some ownership by providing community and one-off grants. Quite an inexpensive way to get sister city kudos, after all.

The other driver is the local council. These sister city programs which are largely coordinated by the local council, some with dedicated sister city staff, albeit part time. but the norm seems to be that even where councils have an in-house commitment to a sister city program, it is limited and not

someone's core job.

Take a moment to think about where your council's sister city responsibilities lie, whether staffed or not. I wouldn't lose much money wagering that they don't sit inside marketing, very few sit inside economic development, none sit inside community services, and most float around as a corporate and governance services appendage.

We tend not to see sister cities as core business, perhaps because the benefits are not clear, and they are certainly not guaranteed. This is a real problem for conservative organisations, and an issue for anyone managing public funds.

Good for the sake of it

Personally, I think sister cities have a value beyond measurement. Of course, I am biased, having worked with and benefited from previous employers' sister city programs, and since then taking great joy in learning about other councils' community-to-community initiatives at the international level.

There are latent opportunities which have hardly been tapped, such as the idea of 'sister workforces' between councils, or linking sister city programs with the demographics of local immigration.

The greatest benefit of sister cities, in my view, is that they remind us we are not islands within our own nations, and that international community-to-community relationships can build peace and cultural understanding as well as, sometime better than big brother, the United Nations.

ABOUT VERNE KRATZIS

Now in his 15th year of Local Government marketing and communications, including periods as convener of the PR Network SIG and council member of the Victorian branch of the Australian Marketing Institute, Verne describes himself as a freelance public servant and "sector connector". Contact verne@sectorconnector.com.au