



SOLANO COUNTY GRAND JURY
2015 - 2016

Vallejo – Sister City to the World

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2015-2016 Solano County Grand Jury

I. SUMMARY

In August and September of 2015 the Mayor of Vallejo accompanied by his spouse and a Vallejo City Council member traveled to Baguio, Philippines as Sister City representatives of Vallejo, California. Several days later, the Mayor and his spouse visited Akashi, Japan, again as Sister City representatives of the City of Vallejo. Travel expenses amounting to over three thousand dollars for these trips were authorized by the Vallejo City Council.

Justification for the trip was the opportunity to accept long standing invitations along with exploring economic development opportunities, as well as, cementing political ties with the two cities visited. Due to the lack of a formal report from the Mayor upon his return, the Mayor's refusal to recuse himself from voting to approve the trip, plus the financial budgetary pressures faced by the City of Vallejo, the 2015-2016 Solano County Grand Jury (Grand Jury) decided to investigate the proprieties of the visits.

II. INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

A SISTER CITY is a "...long-term partnership between two communities in two countries". The relationship "...offers the flexibility to form connections between communities that are mutually beneficial and which address issues that are most relevant for partners".

President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1956 offered in support of Sister Cities the concept "... that people of different cultures could celebrate and appreciate their differences and build partnerships that would lessen the chance of new conflicts..."

The City of Vallejo has had a long history of supporting the Sister City Program and has several relationships with cities throughout the world. Vallejo, as part of its charter, has a Sister City Commission (Chapter 2.38) that has as its "Duties" the following:

- Conduct research on Vallejo's sister city or cities and their respective country or countries, existing and proposed
- Establish and maintain liaison with Sister City International
- Promote the following activities between Vallejo and its sister city or cities
 - Relationship and events between cities
 - Visitor exchange and tour groups and exchange of information, gifts, and articles of cultural and informative value
 - Formal and friendly relations between such groups as schools, youth organizations, clubs, chamber of commerce and churches.
- Maintain a roster of participants interested in correspondence and maintain a translation committee

- Evaluate relationships with current sister cities and make recommendations to city council; and
- Record deliberations and decisions adequately to reveal considerations significant to such decisions

Members to the Sister City Commission are selected either by Mayoral and/or council member nomination and are appointed by the city council.

In the lead up to the vote to approve the sister city visitation there was no formal recommendation by the City of Vallejo’s Sister City Commission or the city’s Sister City Association that determined the destination for travel.

Voting to approve Sister City visits is currently done by the City Council and the Mayor. In 2015, three council members voted against the proposed visit to the Philippines and Japan. However, the motion was passed on a 4 to 3 vote with deciding votes for approval cast by both the Mayor and the City Council Member who were the recipients of the city sponsored trip.

City Council members voting against the trip expressed concern that the visit, “...sends the wrong message...” where taxpayers pay for goodwill trips while other budgetary items are prioritized.

III. METHODOLOGY

The 2015-2016 Grand Jury employed several methods of research while investigating the issues presented in this case.

- Accessed Websites to obtain background information about Sister City programs and the City of Vallejo government
- Conducted interviews with city council members and the Mayor
- Obtained dissenting opinions from local political groups published in local newspapers
- Researched the historical background of the Sister City program and Sister City International
- Obtained receipts of travel expenses

IV. STATEMENT OF FACTS

On July 28, 2015 the Vallejo City Council members and the Mayor voted on a proposed Sister City goodwill tour to the Philippines and Japan. The vote to approve the trip was 4 to 3, with the Mayor and three City Council members voting in favor of the visit.

During the discussion with respect to the Sister City visit in 2015, a question was addressed to the City Attorney as to the propriety of the Mayor and the City Council member taking part in the voting process. A verbal opinion offered by the City Attorney indicated that there was no conflict of interest issue.

The Mayor submitted receipts for reimbursement for hotel accommodations in Manila, meals, groceries, ground transportation and gifts for his host. These expenses were in addition to preapproved air travel.

The City Council approved \$600 to the accompanying council member for payment of round trip airfare to Japan. However, there is no record that the council member accompanied the Mayor to Japan or used the funds for the flights.

A city council member (who had already planned a trip to the Philippines to visit family members) proposed the trip. The round trip air expenses to and from the Philippines were to be paid for out-of-pocket by the council member.

The Mayor learned of the trip approximately one month prior to the planned visit. This provided an opportunity for the Mayor to accept an open invitation for a sister city visit to Baguio, Philippines and Akashi, Japan.

In Baguio, the Mayor and his spouse stayed at an exclusive member only country club resort, participated in the local Charter Day Parade (along with the accompanying city council member), attended ceremonies at the Philippine Military Academy (the Philippines' West Point), went to a city council meeting, visited a former US military base (Camp John Hay), played golf and participated in other planned events in their honor.

After visiting Baguio, the Mayor and his spouse returned to Manila and made arrangements to fly to Akashi, Japan.

In Japan the Mayor and his spouse were the private guests of an Akashi Sister City Association Host Family. During their stay they met with city representatives and were given tours of Akashi and Kobe, Japan which included the following: a visit to a sake factory, a botanical garden and Himeji Castle. In addition, the Mayor and his spouse toured the Akashi Bridge and visited a cultural museum which had a room dedicated to the City of Vallejo. After completing the Akashi stay, they returned to Manila and from there flew back to Vallejo, CA.

There is no published record of formal meetings during the tours to discuss economic development opportunities for potential business endeavors, or any reference reviewing the highlights of the trip and the objectives achieved in either county.

Upon the Mayor's return, only a cursory remark before the Vallejo City Council mentioning that it was a good trip was voiced. The Vallejo Council Member also failed to offer a report.

V. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Finding 1

Failing to recuse themselves, the Mayor and a Council Member opened a controversy by taking advantage of an existing program to fund what many feel was a paid vacation. Currently, there is no ordinance/bylaw in place to require the Mayor and/or a Council Member to recuse themselves from approving a city sponsored trip.

Recommendation 1

- 1A. In the future, to eliminate any appearance of a conflict of interest controversy, it is recommended that any mayor and/or council member that have been selected to participate in a Sister City event requiring travel outside the State of California or to a foreign county recuse themselves from voting to approve such motion.
- 1B. It is further recommended that appropriate parliamentary language be drafted, reviewed, and approved to address this issue.

Finding 2

There was no requirement to present a formal written report to the City Council highlighting the visit accomplishments.

Recommendation 2

- 2A. If travel is to generate "good will," then an explanation as to what good will measures are expected to be obtained should be communicated to the city council prior to and upon return of a Sister City visit.
- 2B. If the purpose of the visit is to explore economic opportunities, the economic director should be included on the visit and a report citing any possibilities/outcomes should be presented to the city council in a written report.

Finding 3

The Mayor voiced the opinion that the visits were a lot of work and not the kind of visit that would imply a relaxing vacation yet he stayed at a sponsored member only country club in Baguio, played golf and was the guest at dining venues. In Japan, he was the household guest of a family during his stay. In both locations he was given extensive tours of the cities where he stayed.

Recommendation 3

All Sister City trips shall be discussed by the Vallejo City Council as to the purpose/nature of the trip to determine whether it is for business development or goodwill, or both. If the intent of the visit is of a formal nature, i.e., a business trip, then business accommodations in lieu of host accommodations should be arranged in advance. If the visits are informal, i.e., a guest of a host, then an explanation as to the type of accommodation the City of Vallejo representative will receive should be noted.

This recommendation is to clarify the purpose of the visit and to establish if the primary reason for the trip is to garner business opportunities or good will.

Finding 4

The Vallejo City Attorney repudiated a claim that it was a conflict of interest for council members including the Mayor to vote for a Sister City trip.

Recommendation 4

The Vallejo City Attorney provide the Mayor and City Council Members written legal documentation that supports a non-conflict of interest opinion.

COMMENTS

The function, duties and responsibilities of the Vallejo Sister City Commission currently are vague and played no part in the most recent visit to Asia. Even though the commission is small and plays a minor role in the City of Vallejo's governance, the current method of selecting and nominating commission members speaks to cronyism and political favor payback.

Regarding the Vallejo City Sister City Commission, the Grand Jury suggests that the Vallejo Mayor and Vallejo City Council Members consider dissolving said commission.

The City of Vallejo may be better served by enlisting expanded assistance from Sister City International for developing contemporary relationships with other sister city participants from around the world.

In times of economic belt tightening the Vallejo City Council should use caution in approving travel outside of the United States since there are better uses for taxpayers' money in the City of Vallejo.

Spending on trips abroad appears as a frivolous use of money and sends a message to Vallejo citizens as to the Vallejo City Councils priorities.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Mayor, City of Vallejo
Council Members, City of Vallejo

COURTESY COPIES

Clerk, Solano County Board of Supervisors