

DATE OF MEETING OCTOBER 6, 2025

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SUBJECT FRIENDSHIP CITY PROGRAM AND POLICY

OVERVIEW

Purpose of Report

To bring forward a Friendship City Program and Policy that sets the criteria and process for international city partnerships.

Recommendation

That Council:

1. Support the establishment of a Friendship City Program; and
2. Endorse the Friendship City Policy as attached in the Staff report titled "Friendship City Program and Policy" dated 2025-OCT-06.

BACKGROUND

A Friendship City, or Twinning (also known as Sister City) relationship is a formal or informal partnership between two municipalities in different countries. These relationships aim to promote international relationships, cultural and educational exchanges, and economic cooperation.

While Sister City agreements are typically formal, long-term partnerships involving regular delegation exchanges and ongoing municipal commitments, Friendship City arrangements are more flexible, project-focused, and community-led, requiring fewer municipal resources. Both models support collaboration in areas such as trade, tourism, education, and humanitarian efforts.

Over the past three decades, the City of Nanaimo has hosted numerous international delegations, particularly from the Asia Pacific region, seeking to establish Sister City or Friendship City ties. However, the City has opted not to pursue Sister City agreements due to the significant long-term commitments they entail, including municipal staff time, budget allocations, and recurring delegation exchanges.

The City of Nanaimo currently has Friendship City Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) with the following cities:

- **Iwatsuki City, Japan** (1995) – Education and culture
- **Sunyani, Ghana** (2014) – Education and culture
- **Guilin, China** (2014) – Education, culture, tourism and trade

To date, these relationships have operated without a formal policy framework, resulting in limited or non-existent outcomes. A recent request by the Nanaimo Chinese Freemasons Society to form a Friendship City relationship with Yangzhou, China, has reinforced the need for establishing a structured policy to evaluate and guide these partnerships for meaningful outcomes.

DISCUSSION

Developing a Friendship City Policy provides a strategic, fiscally responsible avenue for international engagement aligned with community values. Potential benefits include:

- **Economic Development:** Creating opportunities for trade, investment, and tourism
- **Cultural and Educational Exchange:** Supporting student exchanges, cultural festivals, and shared learning experiences

The proposed program is designed to:

- Strengthen cultural and economic ties
- Be simple to administer
- Remain cost-neutral for the City
- Be governed by time-limited MOUs with clearly defined objectives and performance expectations

Under this model, day-to-day coordination and programming would be managed and funded by the sponsoring local non-profit organization. Council's role would be to formally endorse partnerships that meet the City's criteria. The policy would also include mechanisms for evaluating new applications and sunsetting agreements at the end of a defined term.

Staff reviewed relevant policies from several other Canadian municipalities, including Toronto, Burnaby, Vancouver, Richmond, Victoria, and Surrey. Based on best practices, staff recommend the development of a formal Friendship City Policy (Attachment 1 of the report).

CITY OF NANAIMO FRIENDSHIP CITY PROGRAM FRAMEWORK

The proposed policy offers a low-cost, flexible approach to building international relationships that support trade, tourism, investment and educational and cultural collaboration. Under this framework, local non-profit organizations—representing Nanaimo based residents or businesses and maintaining active connection with proposed Friendship City—may apply for official designation.

The applicants would be fully responsible for organizing and funding all activities associated with the partnership and must demonstrate that the proposed relationship meets the following criteria:

- **Strong Community, Civic, and Corporate Support:** Evidence of broad-based local support including letters from community leaders, businesses, and elected officials; or the formation of a new or existing non-profit society with a demonstrated connection to the proposed Friendship City.
- **Alignment of Goals and Priorities:** Demonstrated cultural ties and policy alignment in priority areas such as sustainability, housing affordability, diversity, or shared urban characteristics (e.g., population size, geography).
- **Diplomatic and Ethical Compatibility:** The proposed partner city must be located in a country with which the Government of Canada maintains formal diplomatic relations and should adhere to principles of good governance and ethical standards.

Applicants would submit an online application to the City's Economic Development Officer (see Attachment A to the policy).

PROPOSED APPROVAL PROCESS

1. **Application Submission:** The Non-Profit entity submits an online application to the Economic Development Officer.
2. **Application Review:** The Economic Development Officer reviews submissions for completeness and alignment with program criteria.
3. **Recommendation and Council Approval:** A report with staff's recommendation is presented to Council for consideration and potential approval of the MOU.
4. **MOU Signing:** Following Council's decision, if applicable, the Mayor's Office coordinates the signing of the MOU between the Mayors of Nanaimo and the proposed Friendship City.
5. **Annual Reporting:** The non-profit applicant is required to submit an annual report to the Economic Development Officer outlining activities and results. Reports are shared with Council.
6. **Term and Renewal:** MOUs are valid for five years, with one possible renewal for an additional five-year term.

The City's involvement is limited to:

- Signing the MOU;
- Sending an annual confirmation letter to the Friendship City; and
- Providing basic protocol support for visiting delegations.

PROPOSED PROGRAM LIMITS

- **One New Agreement per Year:** To ensure manageability, a maximum of one new Friendship City agreement may be established each year.
- **Five Active Agreements:** The number of active Friendship City relationships will be capped at five.
- **Grandfathering Existing MOUs:** The City's three existing Friendship City relationships will not count toward the five maximum relationships limit.

These constraints allow the City to allocate staff resources effectively while maintaining meaningful engagement with partner cities.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE AND RESPONSIBILITIES

- **Non-Profit Applicant:** Submits online application. Leads all Friendship City activities, funds events, sustains the relationship, and submits annual reports to the Economic Development Officer.
- **Economic Development Officer:** Manages applications, evaluations, MOU drafting, event coordination, and reporting to Council including scheduled reviews of the policy.

- **Council:** Reviews and approves the policy and its updates, agreements, and annual updates.
- **Mayor's Office:** Signs MOUs as necessary and provides basic protocol support for visiting delegations.
- **Legislative Services:** Collects and maintains official records regarding the agreements.

All MOUs will contain a clause that permits the City to terminate the relationship if the partner city no longer meets the established criteria or if both cities mutually agree to dissolve the agreement.

A diagram outlining the proposed process for approving Friendship Cities is included as Attachment 2 of the report.

OPTIONS

Option 1

That Council:

1. Support the establishment of a Friendship City Program; and
2. Endorse the Friendship City Policy as attached in the Staff report titled "Friendship City Program and Policy" dated 2025-OCT-06.

Advantages:

- The Friendship City partnerships can support trade, tourism, investment, cultural and educational exchanges.
- Having a policy ensures each partnership has clear terms and objectives.
- The partnerships engage local community groups and immigrant entrepreneurs.

Disadvantages: Some staff time is required to manage agreements.

Financial Implications: Any cost to the Friendship City Program will be covered within existing budgets.

Option 2

That Council provide alternate direction to staff.

SUMMARY POINTS

- The proposed Friendship City Program provides a clear, consistent, and community-driven framework for international partnerships.
- Aligns with Nanaimo's strategic priorities and fiscal responsibility, while offering pathways for economic development, cultural exchange, and global engagement.
- The program ensures measurable outcomes, time-limited partnerships, and local ownership of Friendship City activities.

- Council approval is sought to formalize this program and support Nanaimo's global connections in a sustainable and meaningful way.

ATTACHMENTS

ATTACHMENT 1: Draft Friendship City Policy

ATTACHMENT 2: Friendship City Program Approval Process

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