

# Developing an International Sister "Region" Program: A Case Study and a "Reality Check"

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## Introduction

The spirit of regional cooperation is strong in the four counties of western North Carolina that constitute the Western Piedmont Council of Governments (WPCOG). So strong, in fact, that local governments have lobbied to remain united several times over the years even when their geographical boundaries were challenged. The 23 cities and towns and four counties in what is known as the Unifour area have cooperated on projects ranging from transportation planning and regional marketing to housing and job training. So it was natural for them to consider a multi-jurisdictional approach when they first learned about the Sister Cities program. In the process, the Unifour team discovered hidden obstacles and unanticipated successes that might well serve as a guide or model for those considering a similar international partnership.

This article discusses the Sister City activities of the Western Piedmont Council of Governments (WPCOG) as an example of substantive cross-national regionalism.

## Early Years of the Western Piedmont Council of Governments (WPCOG)

From its origin 30 years ago, three factors helped provide the thread interweaving the Unifour region: the shared geography of the Catawba River Valley, a long history of successful manufacturing employment, and a common heritage of religion (mainly Baptist and Lutheran), hard work, and small-town values.

Other factors strengthened these common threads and provided the fabric for a successful regional council, including a long tradition of the council-manager form of local government, strong fiscal conservatism and a pro-business attitude. The Western Piedmont Council of Governments, created by 14 local governments in 1968 and designated as one of 18 planning regions in North Carolina by Governor Robert Scott in 1970, began its life with four key goals:

- to promote intergovernmental coordination in communications, planning efforts, and common problem-solving;
- to help establish and meet regional development goals;
- to be the umbrella agency for all policy and administrative coordination of areawide, multi-jurisdictional problems and agencies; and
- to identify and respond to potential local or regional threats and opportunities.

From its origination in 1968, the WPCOG has evolved from two persons providing technical and administrative assistance to 14 local governments to an agency of nearly 50 persons serving 27 local governments in a variety of ways: planning for local, environmental, transportation, and regional issues; community and economic development; small business loans; housing (rehabilitation, rental subsidy, and mortgage assistance programs); job training; aging; and EMS.

### **Origins of the Western Piedmont Sister Cities Association**

Given the WPCOG's experience in dealing with a range of local government concerns, it seemed logical that local governments interested in exploring the Sister Cities concept would turn to the COG to facilitate that discussion and manage the decision-making process. The Sister Cities program was first introduced to the area in 1991 at a meeting of the North Carolina League of Municipalities.

Sister Cities International (SCI) grew from President Dwight D. Eisenhower's "People to People" program established in 1956. "[We] cannot achieve peace without understanding, and understanding can only be achieved through the hearts of the people," President Eisenhower said. The tax-exempt, nonprofit organization coordinates contacts between cities in the United States and other countries and is said to be the world's largest volunteer organization. Over 900 U.S. cities are linked with 1,400 cities in foreign lands, according to SCI publications.

Several Unifour local governments were interested in the SCI program but weren't certain they wanted to commit their own full-time staff and resources. They approached the WPCOG to determine if there was regionwide interest in the concept. COG staff met with elected and appointed officials to gauge their interest in the program and discovered an interest in pursuing a Sister Cities relationship collectively rather than on a city-to-city basis.

After consideration by all 27 WPCOG members, seven governments initially expressed an interest in becoming part of an international partnership. They felt that a progressive international partnership would help the continued growth of our four-county, 320,000-person Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) by helping local governments become more aware of global markets and expanding the Unifour's educational, technical and cultural interests. Although a regional approach to Sister Cities had not been tried before, according to officials at Sister Cities International (SCI), local government officials felt it was worth the effort. One issue in pursuing a regional partnership was finding potential partners who were already dis-

posed to think about challenges and solutions in a regional way.

In 1992, seven Unifour local governments—two counties and five cities and towns—passed resolutions to organize the Western Piedmont Sister Cities Association (WPSCA). The WPCOG enlisted the help of Sister Cities International, the North Carolina coordinator for SCI and an attorney from a member county government and began filing articles of incorporation and clarifying the organization's tax-exempt status. Each of the seven local governments appointed members to serve on the WPSCA Board.

The organization established these goals:

1. To exchange ideas and develop friendship with counterparts in another culture on a direct personal basis.
2. To develop ways for the diverse elements of every community to come together to enjoy and profit from a cooperative program.
3. To open new dialogues with the people of other cultures to find unique solutions to improving the quality of life.
4. To better understand our own community by interpreting our way of life to the people of other cultures.
5. To cause the people of the region it represents and the people of similar cities of foreign nations to acquire a consciousness of each other, to understand one another as individuals, as members of their community, as citizens of their country, and as part of the family of nations.
6. To include people, ideas, and culture in a variety of educational, institutional, municipal, professional, technical and government projects.
7. To offer an opportunity for people of our region to experience, explore, and absorb other cultures through long-term partnerships established at the local level.

### **Finding a "Sister Region"**

Once the organization had officially been formed, it was faced with a more basic issue: finding what might be called a "Sister Region," a multi-jurisdictional, international exchange program under the auspices of Sister Cities International. As

members of the newly-formed board set about to decide what exactly they wanted in a Sister Region, they developed a set of criteria to select an international partner. They wanted a partner with a genuine interest and ability to follow through in creating a multi-jurisdictional local governmental or regional partnership. A potential Sister Region would have a combined population between 200,000 and 500,000, compared to the Unifour's 300,000 people. Industries would be high technology, light and heavy manufacturing, or human services related. The ideal sister region would have vocational and public schools and institutions of higher learning and an interest in the arts. It was also important that a potential partner have sports teams, health care facilities, communications systems, and an established transportation network. Economic factors such as markets for the exchange of goods and services, tourism, positive investment climate, and appropriate banking and manufacturing and services to support trade were also rated important. The group was adamant that government leaders in any potential partnership be fully committed to the relationship and that the region have full diplomatic relations with the United States.

The group looked at various countries including Japan, France, Moldova, and Sweden but finally chose to pursue its initial relationship in Germany due to the Unifour area's strong Lutheran and German heritage and the investment of German companies in this region of western North Carolina. Early efforts to partner with Gera, located in Thuringia, Germany, did not materialize when it was discovered that area was already affiliated with another American city. In 1994, the WPSCA began discussions with Der Altenburger Land, a region of one county and five smaller cities and towns located in the former East Germany about 30 miles south of Leipzig. Interestingly enough, Der Altenburger Land is only about 30 miles east of Gera, the Unifour's first contact in Germany. The board was pleased to discover that Der Altenburger closely matched the WPSCA's search criteria. One unexpected bonus from this pairing was the discovery of close connections between Altenburg, with strong ties to Martin Luther

and the origins of the Reformation, and the Unifour's German and Lutheran cultural heritage.

### **Exploring the Altenburg Region**

Two officials from Der Altenburger Land—the chairman of Altenburg County and the vice-mayor of the Town of Altenburg—visited the Unifour area in early 1995 to meet with government and community officials and tour the Unifour. The Altenburg region, in turn, hosted eight ambassadors from the Unifour later that same year. The eight visitors, among them government officials, Sister Cities board members and staff of Lenoir-Rhyne College in Hickory (the local Lutheran college), toured churches, castles, businesses, schools, recreational facilities, museums, and government offices. The ambassadors returned from Germany favorably impressed with the area and the reception they received. While in Germany, representatives of both areas signed a "Letter of Intention" to pursue a formal Sister Cities partnership.

Upon their return, the ambassadors recommended that the WPSCA join with Der Altenburger Land in a formal relationship. The WPSCA passed a resolution endorsing the partnership and asked local government members to adopt similar resolutions supporting it. A formal Sister Cities agreement, however, was not signed quickly.

Exchanges between the two regions did continue, however, as three couples from Altenburg visited the Unifour in March 1996 as part of an exchange with Altenburg's medical community. Visitors included an Altenburg County official responsible for the boards of health, youth, social services, and culture, and his wife, a physician. Also visiting were a medical superintendent of cardiology and an internist at the Altenburg Hospital, his wife, and the manager of the Altenburg Hospital and his wife. Five of the Unifour's six hospitals hosted the visitors and shared with them various medical applications and specialized services. The guests were also treated to a day at North Carolina Baptist Hospital, a nationally-respected teaching facility affiliated with Bowman Gray School of Medicine, in nearby Winston-Salem.

During this visit, the Altenburg County official offered the Unifour area an exhibit commemorating the 450th anniversary of the death of Martin Luther. The Sister Cities Board was eager to exhibit these materials and combined them with 10 priceless religious paintings loaned from Bob Jones University. The Unifour exhibit was viewed by school groups, including German language and history students, civic groups, senior citizen groups, church groups, and others. During the past year, the exhibit has continued to move throughout the four-county region, stopping at local libraries, community colleges, churches, and schools.

### **Signing the Official Sister Cities Agreement**

The collective efforts of the local government members and WPCOG staff finally came to fruition with the official signing of a Sister Cities partnership agreement on March 19, 1997. Altenburg's top county official and a mayor of a small town in Der Altenburger Land, along with their wives, visited the area. A signing ceremony was held in the Arts Center of Catawba Valley and featured a group of American middle-school children, who are studying German. The American and the German national anthems were sung in the native languages. Posters by local school children were displayed and later mailed to German students as a gift from Unifour school children.

### **Continuing International Exchanges**

The most recent exchange, and one we hope to continue, is an exchange of local government employees. Such exchanges will help German and American officials experience some of the key differences between governmental structure, practices, and tax laws here and in Germany. Daily living in their partner's culture and understanding those experiences is a key goal of these exchanges. Early in 1998, an administrative assistant in the office of the chief county official in Altenburg arrived to begin a six-week internship in the Unifour. He will work in offices of two cities, two counties and the WPCOG. Staff will accompany him on tours of water plants, police and fire departments, housing authorities, fi-

nance departments; illustrate planning and GIS applications for local government and regional use; and discuss federally-mandated programs such as services for the elderly and job training. Host families throughout the region will welcome him into their homes after the workday. Later this year, a local county personnel director will journey to Altenburg to share similar activities, working in local governments in Der Altenburger Land, and living with host families. Other local officials in both countries are expressing interest in future exchanges.

Future international exchanges include a visit from a judge in the Altenburg area to western North Carolina. He hopes to discuss law with local colleagues and observe legal proceedings in an American courtroom. Under discussion is an exchange between art museums in both regions. Altenburg officials are also eager for economic developers and business persons from the Unifour to visit Germany and explore ways of exchanging goods and opportunities for expanded trade.

### **Obstacles**

This brief overview of the successful partnership between the WPCOG and Altenburg needs to be tempered with a "reality check," since none of our "successes" was achieved without hard work, much uncertainty and some anxiety. Several obstacles to successful international partnerships might usefully be described here.

1. *The Concept of a "Regional" Partnership:* A regional or multi-jurisdictional partnership is much more difficult to understand and to manage than a city-to-city or county-to-county relationship. While local governments within a region have similar interests, they need to be different enough to bring new ideas and perspectives to the whole; regional groups also should be cohesive, united in the goal of promoting an area larger than each of its individual units. Within any regional group, it's a given that there is always one unit that is larger than the others; has more amenities than the others; or perhaps has more staff resources and even more funds to commit to projects.

We have experienced this with our partnership. The largest city represented by our organization is 33,000 and the smallest 1,027. The largest city obviously not only has more staff and a larger budget, but the major hospitals, arts centers, meeting facilities, etc. This fact has made it difficult to ensure that the smaller towns feel a sense of ownership and actively participate in planning for international exchanges. We have found that everyone must be involved to share their own version of what America is like. Politically, equal participation is also an absolute necessity because at this time all member governments financially support the program equally.

2. *Cultural Differences:* Language turned out to be a greater obstacle than originally expected. Many of the German local government officials were educated during the days of Communist East Germany and learned only a smattering of English. And, in spite of the Unifour's German heritage, few Unifour citizens speak that language with ease. The difficulties of communicating back and forth—in spite of the wonders of the fax machine—were complicated by the language factor on both sides.

Another difference presenting obstacles to this regional partnership is what might be called "cultural behavior." For example, although representatives of the Western Piedmont Sister Cities group were anxious to finalize an agreement, it would be nearly two years before that could happen officially. It was difficult for Americans, used to a fast-paced business climate, to understand why our counterparts in Germany were so very patient, indeed, so unhurried, about formalizing our Sister Cities relationship.

3. *Staffing:* Although Kontakt, an organization in Altenburg similar to the WPSCA, was formed with Altenburg County and towns, neither organization has any permanent staff. Both organizations rely on existing administrative personnel to promote the partnership program and make the complex and detailed plans necessary for the various exchanges.

Staff assistance to the WPSCA is provided as part of the regular services of the Western Piedmont COG. Activities include promoting the Sister Cities program regionwide, providing technical assistance to the officers and members of the WPSCA, staffing all committee meetings of the WPSCA and other functions, and working with officials in Germany to arrange exchanges. Staff assistance is provided in Germany in much the same way.

The absence of full-time staffing has been a challenge both in the Unifour and in Altenburg. The staff assistant in Germany visited our area in the Fall of 1997 to learn more about the Unifour. This visit reinforced both staff members' perceptions of the difficulties in describing the regional Sister Cities relationship and ensuring support in their communities. Both staff members feel that if they knew more about their international partner and the people and the other's community, they could be more successful in selling the international partnership idea to their countrymen.

4. *Community Involvement:* To ensure the success of any such international relationship, business and community leaders, as well as local government members, must be involved in Sister Cities partnerships. Although the WPSCA was begun by local governments, businesses, especially German-based companies and German employees, the local Lutheran college and churches have from the beginning been key participants in the international partnership. Local governments must not exclude these key persons from leadership roles in the organization. Constituents of governments, businesses, schools, and church must be blended into shared leadership roles.

### **Successes**

In spite of the obstacles just discussed, the rewards of a regional partnership are great. Although challenging, a regional partnership has a larger audience and draws on a larger group for ideas and insight. A regional partnership brings with it additional resources, not only financial resources, but

manpower and the ability to accomplish things on a larger scale.

Some of the successes the Sister Cities partnership between Der Altenburger Land and the WPSCA include these accomplishments:

1. Involvement in the Sister Cities partnership has heightened local awareness of the German community already living and working here in the Unifour. German industries and citizens in this region of North Carolina feel a greater part of the local community through this program. Religious exchanges between churches in both countries and the local Lutheran liberal arts college have increased Germans' identity within the Unifour.
2. The WPSCA Board and its counterparts in Altenburg have gained a personal knowledge of each other and an understanding of the two regions as a whole.
3. English and German language programs have evolved with the establishment of an English program in Altenburg and faculty and student exchanges between Lenoir-Rhyne College in Hickory and schools in Altenburg.
4. Ordinary citizens have made special efforts to include the Altenburg region in their travel plans when exploring Germany as tourists.
5. Finally, a variety of youth exchanges have worked to extend awareness of international culture to young people. In addition to open (and e-mail) pals and a book sharing program, a German youth soccer team has been invited to visit

the Unifour and an exchange between YMCAs in both regions is being explored.

Like any worthwhile venture, the success of a regional Sister Cities partnership lies in its people. Respected leaders within their communities who have the ability to raise money and enlist support are an absolute requirement for a successful partnership. Perhaps equally important, successful partnership members must be leaders who recognize the importance of regionalism both conceptually and within their own region. They must understand that specific regional issues present challenges and opportunities not only for their own community but also for their new international partner. ■

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