

FROM LOCAL TO GLOBAL AND BACK

What Cities and Towns Can Learn from Each Other

AS ADVANCES IN transportation and technology shrink the distance between countries, globalization becomes a reality for local governments that were once isolated from the rest of the world by geography. Local economic development offices seek to attract multinational firms to the community. Families send their college-age children off to spend semesters abroad. Immigrants from other countries settle in the community. Citizens gain international exposure through business connections, sister cities activities, and personal travel.

As a result, community leaders and residents are increasingly aware that they live in and interact with a world far beyond their boundaries and that they can broaden their perspectives and learn from international relationships. Cities and towns learn from each other across international borders in a number of ways — formal city-to-city partnerships, person-to-person professional exchanges, technical assistance relationships, and hundreds of conferences, webinars, meetings, and publications. Each provides its own opportunities.

The International City/County Management Association (ICMA) fosters international learning opportunities through a number of programs, and Colorado local governments have been active participants in them. This article draws

on examples from those programs, with an emphasis on Colorado municipalities.

City-to-City Partnerships

Among the most familiar city-to-city partnerships are those formed under the umbrella of Sister Cities International, which reports more than 500 U.S. communities involved in 2,000-plus relationships. These are voluntary, long-term relationships between community members, established with the support of chief elected officials. They focus on areas of mutual interest, usually within the general topics of youth and education, arts and culture, business and trade, and municipal exchange and community development. Colorado has 15 participating cities and towns.

City-to-city partnerships also are developed under the sponsorship of business, cultural, faith-based, and other organizations with the goal of furthering the mission of the sponsor.

Person-to-Person Exchanges and Visits

Like city-to-city programs, person-to-person exchanges are sponsored by numerous organizations. One example is the Professional Fellows program of the U.S. Department of State. Since 2010, ICMA has managed portions of the program that bring young professionals to the United States and provide an opportunity for reciprocal

visits by U.S. hosts. The programs have addressed the topics of the legislative process and governance, climate change, and sustainability.

In 2013, the Town of Basalt, with participation from Aspen, Snowmass Village, and Pitkin County, hosted two professionals from Thailand. Jon Peacock, Pitkin County manager, made a reciprocal visit. From Thailand, he reported on wide-ranging meetings with local officials in Chiang Mai covering global climate change, sustainable cities, finance, tourism, general administration, traffic management, and the media.

After a visit in Bangkok, Peacock blogged: “With over 14 million visitors a year, Bangkok has set its sights on becoming the premier visitor destination and top Asian capital. Though very different in terms of population, culture, and environment, Bangkok has very similar priorities to Pitkin County to meet their goals — environmental protection, infrastructure improvement, restoring and preserving unique cultural amenities, and promotion of events, conventions, etc. Many ideas to bring home!

“[In Thailand] there are some challenges ahead to deal with the impacts of tourism, both direct and indirect. This has helped me better appreciate the importance of the regulatory environment we have created to protect local character and



Steve Glueck, Golden community and economic development director, facilitates economic development planning in Sri Lanka. Photo courtesy of ICMA.

environment in Pitkin County and the communities of Aspen, Snowmass, and Basalt.”

Later, Pitkin County hosted two fellows from East Timor with help from Basalt and Snowmass Village, and the county’s public works director went to East Timor. All agreed the experiences were “amazing.”

Technical Assistance Relationships

U.S. cities frequently offer technical expertise to developing countries or those that are recovering from conflict, a natural disaster, or other setbacks. It is tempting to regard this assistance as a one-way street, but in practice, many of the people who share their expertise with less-developed countries have been surprised and gratified that their own cities gained a great deal as well. Professionals from Colorado cities, towns, and counties have been among them, generously providing technical assistance and taking home lessons in return.

The ICMA CityLinks™ program, for example, pairs municipal officials in developing and decentralizing countries with their U.S. counterparts to find workable ways to address specific challenges in these non-U.S. countries. The program is based on the principle that cities learn best from each other. CityLinks partnerships have produced tangible results in the host countries:

- Solid waste management has been markedly improved in Ethiopia, Georgia, and other countries — thanks in part to technical assistance provided by Public Works Director Dan Hartman and other staff from Golden.
- A robust economic development program was developed by a consortium of Bulgarian cities and local economic development was jump-started in Sri Lanka — thanks in part to training provided by Steve Glueck, Golden community and economic development director.
- Municipal crime and violence prevention programs took root in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Panama, thanks to the participation of police and sheriff’s departments in California, Florida, Texas, and Virginia.

Earlier this year, ICMA selected Boulder as a CityLinks partner to work with the Municipal Corporation of Shimla, India, in a nine-month Climate Adaptation Partnership Program focused on sharing experiences, best practices, and lessons learned by the two cities, which are similar in topography and climate challenges. Shimla is located in a geologically unstable and climate-sensitive region in the western Himalayas and relies on a network of natural streams and rivers for its water supply. It has experienced a 40 percent reduction in annual rainfall over the past 25 years

and a mean average winter temperature increase of 2.4 degrees Celsius. As population growth and climate change continue, particularly with rainfall patterns, Shimla faces issues of drought and flash floods, resulting in water contamination, systemic public health issues, and tremendous pressure on its water supply systems.

Carl Castillo, Boulder policy advisor, visited Shimla in May 2015 to meet government officials and witness firsthand the range of climate challenges there. Then in August, Boulder welcomed a delegation from Shimla. The partner cities are working on developing a local climate-risk vulnerability assessment of Shimla’s water supply and providing technical guidance on reducing cross-contamination of the water treatment systems. According to Castillo, “In doing so, Boulder is not only embracing its responsibility to help cities less fortunate, but developing and refining resilience skills and practices that will prove to be essential to its own staff, residents and businesses.”

Additional examples come from Hartman and Glueck. Hartman reflected on the things he and others from Golden have learned from work with local officials in Bulgaria, Kosovo, Georgia, West Bank/Gaza, Romania, and Afghanistan:

INTERNATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES WITH ICMA

ICMA OFFERS OPPORTUNITIES FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT PROFESSIONALS TO ENRICH THEIR STAFFS and showcase their communities by participating in international programs as individuals or in city-to-city partnerships. Participants share their expertise with professionals in developing and decentralizing countries and build new relationships in the global community.

Assignments include exchanges, technical assistance, and/or training in such topics as climate change adaptation, water and sanitation solutions, urban food security, crime prevention and public safety, local economic development, and the legislative process and governance. Some specific opportunities include:

Hosting International Professionals. ICMA seeks U.S. cities, associations, companies, and other organizations to host professionals from East Asian/Pacific countries who come to the United States to participate in the Professional Fellows program funded by the U.S. Department of State with a focus on civic engagement, environmental sustainability, economic empowerment, and/or education.

CityLinks Partnerships. CityLinks™ (icma.org/citylinks) facilitates partnerships among cities, municipal and professional associations, and other entities to create opportunities for learning and ultimately to shape green and resilient cities. Municipal officials in host countries draw on the resources of their U.S. counterparts. By matching cities facing similar issues, CityLinks creates the opportunity for them to jointly explore their issues, learn from each other, and develop tailor-made solutions.

For more information, send an inquiry to international@icma.org.

- “We are fortunate to have our governing system; some of the cities we have worked with have more than 50 council members and are not particularly functional.
- We tend to look at problems differently; communities we work with usually look to their laws for something that explicitly says they can do something, we assume we can unless law specifically says we cannot.
- We have learned that simple, affordable solutions are often better, and that if we cannot do everything, we can still do something.
- Our international work has been a great lesson in the importance of being able to maintain what we build (more support for the idea that simpler may be better).”

Said Glueck: “Every time I serve as an international pro-bono local government expert, it is an incredibly rewarding experience in human spirit and generosity, and growth of awareness of the wonders of different cultures and societies. Working in Sri Lanka was especially rewarding based

on the reception and appreciation by the local government and chamber of commerce officials that we worked with on a local economic development (LED) partnership and action plan ... In just two short days, we were able to hammer out a concrete plan that promises to streamline LED processes ... There is nothing more gratifying than to experience even a minor transformation in thinking by a group of new friends committed to local government, and to feel their enthusiasm for continuing improvement. Sri Lanka is an experience that will guide my work with new friends and cultures for years to come.”

Other Learning Opportunities

Conferences, webinars, and meetings — far too many to describe — now cross international borders, sometimes virtually, and bring people together to learn from each other.

Sharing Urban Innovations

A robust source of information about urban innovation and lessons learned by cities worldwide is *Citiscope* (www.citiscope.org), which offers an email subscription to articles and

stories prepared by a network of independent journalists. It positions itself as “a conduit of experimentation to public officials, administrators, and decisionmakers of cities worldwide [and] anyone sharing a stake in the urban future.” Here are examples:

- steps taken by Melbourne, Australia, to reach its goal to become carbon-neutral by 2020;
- how the mayor of Christchurch, New Zealand, maintained the momentum of grassroots community groups that sprang up following the 2011 earthquake that struck the city;
- what Singapore is learning from Copenhagen about bicycling;
- what Suwon, South Korea, learned from a neighborhood experiment in car-free living; and
- ten urban innovations that may shape cities of the future.

Citiscope’s editor is prominent journalist Neal Peirce. The *Citiscope* board is chaired by Don Borut, former executive director of the National League of Cities. Vice chair is Richard C. D. Fleming, former CEO of the Metro Denver Chamber of Commerce.