



Guide to Sister Cities Signing Ceremonies

Sister city, county, and state relationships are formally established when the two highest elected or appointed officials sign a formal memorandum of understanding, proclamation, or partnership agreement, which is often done during a formal signing ceremony. While it is important to tailor these ceremonies to fit your specific communities, below is a list that will help guide you in the planning.

GETTING STARTED

- **ESTABLISH A PRIMARY CONTACT FOR THE SIGNING** The first step is to determine the appropriate point of contact in your future sister city with whom you'll coordinate details of the signing ceremony. If it is a large city then there may be a protocol officer, but more likely this will be someone in the mayor's office who manages their schedule. The easiest way to find this individual is simply to inquire with the mayor's office, with whom you should already have a good contact if you are at the point of planning a signing ceremony. For many of the critical steps detailed below you'll want to have one go-to person to assist your city.
- **SYMMETRY AND RECIPROCITY** International protocol typically calls for symmetry in the status of delegations. For example, if the mayor's delegation includes members of the city council it is important to include your local city council in the event as well. If members of various departments or organizations are coming in the delegation, try to find counterparts with whom they can speak.
- **MANAGING EXPECTATIONS** Sometimes the difference between a trip that deepens ties between two communities and one that strains relations is simply the management of expectations. Unless you've discussed a detail of the event with your partners, don't assume it will happen. Details where clarity is extremely important include what costs are born by each side, the day-by-day itinerary, what meetings will take place and when, transportation, etc. Clarity in these areas will help manage expectations and ensure that you and your partners are not disappointed.
- **PRESS** Be sure to coordinate early on with your mayor's office regarding any press releases or invitations to the press to come. You'll want to confirm text of the release with your partners, as well as give them notice of press attending, before they arrive.
- **THE AGREEMENT** One of the first steps to take with your partner is to confirm the text of the agreement in English and in the language(s) of the host country (if it's a bi- or multi-lingual country you may have more than two versions of the agreement). For non-English versions of the agreement it's important to have someone you trust verify that the language in the agreement matches the version in English. While it is most likely that the language will be fine, especially if produced by your partner city, taking some time to verify the language can help you avoid any embarrassing mistakes that could cause you problems later on.

It is recommended that you produce two copies of the agreement in each language used, one for each community. The agreement should be on nice paper, usually oversized, and often displays the city seal of each community. Immediately after the signing you should scan the signed agreement to make sure you have a soft copy, and send it to Sister Cities International to include in our records.

Note: If you haven't already developed the text of your agreement we recommend reviewing our Partnership Agreement Toolkit & Template, available in the Member Area of Sister Cities International's website.

Why do we need a signing ceremony?

All sister city or friendship city agreements are formalized by the mayor or highest elected or appointed official in the community. While signing ceremonies are not a requirement, they typically help bring attention to the partnership, build enthusiasm in the community, and provide the impetus for delegation visits that can help start the relationship strongly.

- **ANNOUNCING ACTIVITIES** You don't necessarily need to have an agreement signed before you start doing activities between cities. In fact, having activities or exchanges already in development, or ready to go, will show the relevance of the partnership. Announcing imminent activities or exchanges will ensure that people see this as a mutually beneficial initiative, and not just a "paper partnership."

THE SIGNING CEREMONY

- **SISTER CITY AGREEMENT VS. WORK PLAN** Sometimes cities include very specific information in the partnership agreement, including timelines, specific activities, or detailed goals for the program. We recommend that you instead keep the partnership agreement more ceremonial and focus on the general goals of the sister cities movement, why your two communities are joining together, your commitment to cooperation, historical connections, and general benefits. The partnership agreement is a historical document; imagine yourself reading it in 25 or 50 years, and if you think it might sound dated, then you might consider making it more ceremonial, and adding a work plan to complement it. Establishing a work plan allows you to get into details that might be inappropriate for a partnership agreement, including timelines, priority areas for programming, individual and mutual responsibilities, lines of communication, financial responsibilities (or lack thereof) and other action items.

- **THE PROGRAM** To the left you will find an example of a program for a sister city signing ceremony to give you an idea of what is possible. You may need to adjust it accordingly if you decide to add or remove speakers or performers.

SAMPLE SIGNING CEREMONY AGENDA

- Welcome
- Remarks by Sister Cities Representative
- National Anthem of the United States of America
- Remarks by U.S. Mayor
- National Anthem of International Sister City Country
- Remarks by International Mayor
- Music and Dance Presentation
- Reading of Agreement
- Signing of Agreement
- Final Remarks and Exchange of Gifts
- Reception

- **THE SITE OF THE SIGNING** Select a place for the ceremony that will display a good backdrop for photographs, usually the City Hall or some other historic location. While it is not necessary, the flags of each country/state/city can be on display for the backdrop or at the sides of the signing table. Please note that there is often very specific protocol for the proper size and placement of flags. If you ever have questions about protocol related to this or any other aspect of the ceremony, you might reach out to your state's Secretary of State, as this office is usually most familiar with state policies related to international protocol. Be sure to prepare saved seats for members of each delegation and other VIPs in the front of the room, as well as room for press.

- **MEETING BEFOREHAND** If they have not already, it is important for the two mayors to meet privately prior to the ceremony to socialize and learn more about one another and their communities. You might actually consider two short meetings: one with just the mayors, and one with both delegations. This gives each mayor a chance to introduce the people he or she brought along, and for those individuals to meet their counterparts face to face. This meeting doesn't need to include all delegates, but it should include those that will take a leadership role in organizing activities. The meeting between just the two mayors allows them to cultivate a closer relationship.

- **OPENING REMARKS** If this is a public event, you will want to identify someone to make opening remarks and introduce the various speakers and mayors. This may be the representative of your local sister city group, someone who was instrumental in the process of establishing your soon to be sister city, or an honorary consul.

- **GIFTS** Gifts are almost always exchanged between the two mayors. Selecting a gift can be a difficult task, but it is important to give something that represents your community. Limited edition historical books, paintings, prints, sculptures, or a key to the city are often used. Try to avoid generic gifts like simple plaques or plastic/glass statuettes that have no tangible connection to your community's identity. When giving the gift, it is common for the mayor to explain its significance, and to emphasize that the gift is from one city to another. It is also not uncommon to have a more informal personal gift, such as a local sports jersey, local food items, or other items that are symbolic of your community, which is given by one mayor to another as a personal gift.





“Selecting a gift can be a difficult task, but it is important to give something that represents your community.”

The pens used during the signing are often kept by the mayors as a token as well, so try to use quality pens that best commemorate the event.

- **RECEPTION** A reception following the event with light snacks and refreshments is often included but by no means required. Depending on the itinerary of the delegation, this also may be the best opportunity for delegates to mingle with their counterparts and continue to build relationships. Often the event will conclude with a reception even if the mayors do not participate.

OTHER SIGNING CEREMONIES

- **REMOTE/STAGGERED SIGNINGS** Sometimes scheduling a delegation visit to formalize the relationship can be difficult. Coordinating schedules and raising funds for travel are the two most commonly cited reasons for delaying an impending relationship. However, there is no formal requirement that a signing ceremony take place with both mayors present, and so remote or staggered signings are always an option. A remote signing is one that is done simultaneously by both sides with videoconferencing through Skype or other online platforms bringing both sides together. This allows for many of the same aspects of traditional signings such as remarks by the mayors, attendance of press, post-signing receptions, etc.

Sometimes, whether due to time differences or technological limitations, this is not possible. In these cases one option is a staggered signing, where each mayor signs the agreement independently, often on different dates. In this scenario one mayor signs all four copies of the agreement (two in each language) and send the all to his or her counterpart. The other mayor then signs the documents and sends one copy in each language back to the other city. In this scenario the official signing date is considered to be when the second mayor signs off on the agreement.

- **RENEWAL SIGNINGS** Sometimes cities may choose to “renew their vows” and re-sign an agreement, even if a valid sister city agreement is currently in place. This may be because the relationship has been dormant for a long period of time and a signing ceremony is a way of bringing attention to a newly active partnership, or because the original agreement doesn’t encompass the goals of the relationship and the mayors wish to sign a new agreement which signals a new direction and priorities.
- **SURROGATES/COUNCIL SIGNINGS** Sister Cities International’s policy is that the mayor or highest elected or appointed official in a community must sign the agreement to make it official. Some cities have inquired about other members of the administration, such as a deputy mayor or city manager, signing on the mayor’s behalf. For reasons of both protocol and policy, Sister Cities International does not recommend that a surrogate be used if the other community’s mayor is signing the relationship.

If the use of a surrogate is unavoidable, then Sister Cities International requires that the mayor of the city in questions send a signed letter confirming that the individual signing the agreement is acting on his or her behalf, and that the mayor approves of the establishment of the relationship or that a space for the mayor’s signature be created below the surrogate’s to be signed at the mayor’s convenience.

