

Sister City Needed?

by SHERALYN ROMAN

I've never had a sister so I cannot speak from direct experience about how such relationships work. I've heard from friends that sisterly relationships are often a kind of 'love/hate' situation; sisters do things that annoy the heck out of you but alternatively, have your back, love you unconditionally and are someone you can rely on. Caledon has a 'sister' relationship apparently; it's one the Town 'is expanding on' through a formal trade delegation with our 'existing Sister City partnership with Isola del Liri, Italy' which took place just this past June. Sisters by birth, whether you love or hate them isn't something you can change, but sisters by choice? I'm wondering what the benefit is of having a 'Sister City'?

The Town sent a delegation to Isola del Liri in June specifically to 'focus on economic development and investment attraction in key sectors including agri-food and food processing.'

According to the Town's own press release, the delegation planned to showcase Caledon as 'a competitive, welcoming destination for investment,' which in turn would align with 'Caledon's goal to support a thriving economy and create high-quality jobs for residents.' Call me a cynic, but the only jobs I've seen come to Caledon in recent history involve warehousing, packaging, same-day order fulfillment and perhaps the odd by-law enforcement position related to addressing our illegal trucking yards issue.

Ever curious, perhaps thinking Isola del Liri had similar issues to us, hence the relationship, a quick Google search suggests otherwise. It seems the town has a long history in paper-making and agriculture, and is now largely viewed as a tourist destination. Caledon used to be a tourist destination too, and yes, it once had a long and proud history in agriculture. Too bad much of that agricultural land is now given over to the aforementioned warehousing and illegal trucking activities for which we are becoming increasingly well known - 'well-known' being a euphemism for infamous.

What also strikes me as curious is that the promotion of this sisterly relationship is in part predicated on the idea of fostering: 'a broader commitment' to advance cultural, tourism, educational, and economic ties, while the Town's Economic Development website alternately promotes Caledon's 'prime location as a transportation hub, [with] access to US and Canadian markets and our highly skilled labour force.'

It further suggests 'our key sectors as advanced manufacturing, transportation and logistics and agriculture.' Like what I imagine happens within many sisterly relationships, there seems to be a disagreement between commitments and goals. Are we focussed on sharing culture and tourism or transportation and logistics goals with our Sister City? I ask because on the surface at least, these goals seem to be at odds with one another.

I realize (again much like sisters have to work at getting along) that proving the economic benefits of such a relationship will take time. Caledon CAO Nathan Hyde suggested that sending the trade mission to our Sister City in June 'demonstrates how Caledon is taking a proactive, strategic approach to economic growth,' and that 'by aligning international outreach with our key sector strengths, we're opening doors to new investment, innovation, and long-term job creation for our community.'

The trouble is, I'm not sure I see the alignment and I'd like to know when we might see the proposed benefits, or if someone has even done an actual cost/benefit analysis of what those proposed benefits might be?

To be clear, this isn't a question of integrity on the part of whomever represented us on this most recent visit since it appears the venture was supported, at least in part, by a Government of Canada CanExport Community Investments Program. Rather it's about questioning what the actual benefit, in dollars and sense (pun intended) might be to Caledon over the longer term. Because, if memory serves, this is the second time a delegation has visited Isola del Liri.

Having a sister can be great. Sometimes the hand-me-downs, the acts of sisterly love and the related benefits are out of this world.

Equally so, sometimes they are outdated, over-promised and under-delivered. What's the true cost of having a ?Sister City?