

HOUSE BILL 585

STATE OF MARYLAND

EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT

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LETTER OF INFORMATION

Secretary of State – Duties – International Friendship Agreements

House Health & Government Operations Committee

February 25, 2020

John C. Wobensmith, Secretary of State

Section 7–109 of the Annotated Code of Maryland charges the Office of the Secretary of State with the lead responsibility for the maintenance and development of Sister–State relationships.

These Sister State relationships are initiated through a Memorandum of Understanding signed by the Governor of Maryland and the Governor of the Sister State. The Sister State relationships, otherwise known as sub-national relationships, are increasingly vital to the State of Maryland because they promote Maryland all over the world. The sub-national agreements can assist in initiating economic development as well as promoting educational *and* cultural exchanges. To date, Maryland has 21 Sister States in 20 countries.

Maryland should continue to take advantage in developing these formal relationships. Due to Maryland's proximity to Washington D.C., I have taken full advantage of our location by visiting nearly 80 Ambassadors. One of the many deliverables arising from our efforts was the recent and historic visit by a delegation of over 20 European Union Member State Ambassadors, led by European Union Ambassador Stavros Lambrinidis.

Last week, I facilitated a visit by the 3rd ranking diplomat at the Chinese Embassy. This diplomat visited with House Speaker Jones and Senate President Ferguson. The visit was important because it maintains open lines of communication at the sub-national level when there is so much dysfunction in Washington D.C. Another deliverable of the Sister State program is the Maryland Sister State Legislative Reception. This is a signature event and has become a "go to" reception, not only for Maryland Legislators, but for the international diplomatic corps from Washington D.C.

Over the last five years, Maryland has become very attractive to countries from all over the world, and they want to formalize a sub-national relationship with our State. The Bill before you provides that the Secretary of State shall have the authority to form and execute an International Friendship Agreement. We should be strategic about our relationships and make sure that Maryland has a process, a path if you will, to begin a formal Sister State Memorandum of Understanding.

We take these Sister State relationships very seriously. These MOU's must be more than window dressing. Unfortunately, in the past, some of these Sister States agreements have been just that.

We believe that a process, beginning with a Friendship Agreement, is a prerequisite for Maryland to determine whether a formal Sister State Memorandum of Understanding is a good fit for our State. At the same time it gives the international community an opportunity to develop a less formal relationship with Maryland.

Thank you.

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