The Challenge: A big city in search of a strategy

Dallas, Texas is a city with a big reputation and bigger aspirations. By almost all metrics, Dallas is a remarkably global city, home to 11 Fortune 500 companies, with 14 more located nearby within the North Texas region, and the world’s second busiest airport. Despite its assets and accomplishments, Dallas had scaled back its global engagement in the past decade for a variety of reasons, including budget cuts and an overall lack of activity during the pandemic. Its approach to international engagement was mostly reactive, like that of many other U.S. cities, focused on welcoming incoming delegations and exploring relations with foreign counterparts on an ad-hoc basis. Until recently, the city lacked a cohesive international strategy.

The Solution: The Mayor’s International Advisory Council

When Mayor Johnson began his first term in 2019, he recognized the importance of international partnerships and articulated a vision to grow Dallas’ stature on the world stage. During his first year in office, Mayor Johnson formed the Mayor’s International Advisory Council (MIAC) composed of retired senior diplomats living in the city - to leverage local expertise and guide the city’s international strategy.

Summary:

- While Dallas and other U.S. cities are deeply connected to the world, they often need additional capacity and expertise to implement international strategies and initiatives.
- Dallas Mayor Eric L. Johnson created a new innovation: the Mayor’s International Advisory Council (MIAC) - composed of retired senior diplomats living in the city - to leverage local expertise and guide the city’s international strategy.

If the greater Dallas region were a stand-alone economy, it would rank in the top 25 in the world, ahead of nations such as Ireland, Norway, and Colombia. No one questions why these countries have a foreign policy. Why shouldn’t cities like Dallas?
The mayor gave the MIAC a mandate to advise him in four areas:
- Strengthening the relationship between Dallas and the Washington, D.C.-based diplomatic corps
- Deepening engagements between Dallas and foreign investors
- Strategizing to increase trade between Dallas and its top trade partners
- Developing statements issued by the mayor on matters of international importance (for example, Mayor Johnson’s statements on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the suspension of sister city relations with Saratov in Russia)

Under the leadership of Jeanne L. Phillips, the MIAC meets regularly with Mayor Johnson, as well as with foreign dignitaries who visit Dallas. The MIAC is a bipartisan enterprise: Mayor Johnson, a Democrat, asked Ambassador Phillips, a Republican, to chair the Council.

The MIAC has produced notable results. For example, MIAC members helped formulate a strategy to bring foreign trade offices to Dallas. Opening new consulates is a potentially Sisyphussian task; trade offices, however, serve as a different kind of foreign outpost, and are quicker and easier to open while still improving foreign relations and increasing trade, cultural exchanges, and foreign direct investment. The MIAC was integral to opening the Trade Office of France in Dallas’ new International District in December 2022. MIAC members’ experience and expertise, including Ambassador Phillips’ posting in Paris, helped facilitate discussions with French representatives.

Members of the MIAC bring country-specific knowledge and contacts that help Dallas navigate its international connections. Dallas regularly hosts foreign delegations featuring high-level dignitaries such as ambassadors, ministers, or heads of state. MIAC members advise the mayor on protocol and on maximizing the impact of these visits.

They also inform the city’s engagement with the local diplomatic community and consular corps. Collaboration with the city’s seven official consulates — Mexico, Canada, Peru, South Korea, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras — and more than 30 honorary consuls amplifies the city’s
LEVERAGING DIPLOMACY EXPERTISE IN THE COMMUNITY: THE DALLAS MAYOR’S INTERNATIONAL ADVISORY COUNCIL

international engagement. For instance, with guidance from MIAC members, Dallas worked with the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Mexican Consulate to organize a visit to the city by more than 50 Mexican mayors and local leaders.

The Mayor's International Advisory Council has proven critical to the city’s international efforts. Gone are the days of ad-hoc internationalism in Dallas. Other cities would be wise to leverage local diplomatic expertise to elevate their international engagement. Dallas’ experience creating the MIAC offers a valuable blueprint.

This City & State Diplomacy Toolkit compiles a collection of case studies and how-to briefs to support the international engagement and global initiatives of local actors. These short, digestible, and practical briefs are written by local practitioners, city and state leaders, and experts based on their direct experience. If you're interested in learning more about this brief or wish to connect with the Truman team, please fill in this short survey.

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