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FEATURED

Mozambique sister city agreement seen as trade boost

By Paul Lagasse plagasse@somdnews.com 2 hrs ago



Charles County's economic development director, Darréll Brown, shown here at the groundbreaking for the new MedStar Shah Medical Group center in Waldorf last month, said that the county's plans to enter into a sister city relationship with Matola Municipality in Mozambique will open up trade opportunities for the county's agricultural and manufacturing businesses.

STAFF PHOTO BY PAUL LAGASSE

Charles County is seeking to establish a sister city relationship with the southeast African nation of Mozambique, an arrangement that the county's economic development department believes will open new markets to local businesses.

Last month, Ambassador Carlos dos Santos wrote to Charles County Board of Commissioners' President Reuben B. Collins II (D) informing him that the county's invitation to participate in a sister city relationship had been accepted by the mayor of Matola Municipality, the largest suburb of Mozambique's capital city of Maputo. A visit by a delegation of county officials and business leaders to formally sign the agreement is being planned tentatively for next spring.

Collins had reached out to dos Santos to propose a sister city partnership after Mozambican representatives participated in an international trade seminar in March that had been arranged by the county's economic development department and which focused on business development opportunities on the African continent.

"[International trade] is important for the overall growth and development of the local economy because not all economies have the resources and skills required to produce certain goods and services," said Darréll Brown, Charles County's director of economic development. "There are markets out there that lack those skills. We felt that our businesses could participate in that, depending on their industries."

Brown said that the ability to enter new markets and increase sales could help local business owners reduce their costs of operation as well. "The bottom line is that import and export can contribute to increasing local business profits," Brown said. "This is part of our long-term business development strategy. It doesn't happen overnight; it takes time."

Located on the southeastern coast of Africa, Mozambique is a predominantly agricultural country of just over 27 million people. Among the reasons identified by Brown's agency for investing in Mozambique are its strategic location as a "gateway" to the member countries of the Southern African Development Community, as well as its "abundant labor force" and its fast-growing economy.

Lucretia Freeman-Buster, Brown's chief of business development, said that many municipalities in the United States pursue sister city relationships with municipalities in other countries as "an international bridge ... that businesses can expand and spur growth through international trade."

Such relationships also help raise the profiles of participating municipalities as travel destinations, Freeman-Buster said.

Charles County also has a sister city relationship with the southwestern German town of Walldorf, which was established in 2008.

"There are many opportunities for great partnerships ... in Africa," Freeman-Buster said. "It is one of the world's growing economies right now, the workforce is very young, and technology is on the rise there. So there are many opportunities."

"We know that Mozambique is very interested in agriculture," Brown explained. "We have a very strong and robust agricultural industry here in Charles County. We'll be able to share that experience through our businesses with them."

Construction and manufacturing are also areas where the two municipalities could find commercial synergies, Brown and Freeman-Buster said. Matola, which is located in the southernmost part of the country, is responsible for 60% of the country's industrial output.

Dos Santos told the Maryland Independent that the sister city partnership with Charles County was appealing because of a number of similarities between it and Matola, particularly their locations as suburbs of their respective nations' capitals and the large percentage of residents who commute elsewhere for jobs. Like Charles County, Matola has a strong agricultural base.

"[Agricultural businesses] are also interested in learning from other, much more developed municipalities like Charles County to build their own capacity to do better," dos Santos said. "They are known for innovating in terms of provision of services, but they know they still lag well behind in terms of what could be achieved, and they believe they can also learn a lot from Charles County."

In addition to commerce, dos Santos would like to see the sister cities arrangement lead to cultural exchanges between Charles County and Matola residents, including teacher and student exchanges.

"We want to also take advantage of the higher education institutions and the technical, vocational institutions that Charles County might have, to beef up capacity for Matola," dos Santos said. "In education, the good thing is that even if you're very well developed, you can learn from other partner who is less developed because of the different experiences that they go through. So it would be a learning experience for Charles County as well."



Dos Santos said that a memorandum of understanding signed by both the United States and Mozambique in June during an international business summit in Maputo should pave the way for investments and partnerships between businesses in Charles County and Matola. A number of other international agreements are also in place to help provide access to regional markets, he added.

"For this particular partnership I see no barrier at all," dos Santos said, noting that both Charles County and Matola Municipality have shown they have the "political will" to bring it about. The county is eyeing the spring of 2020 as a possible date for a trade delegation to visit Matola.

"We believe that when they get to know each other, they can even go further than we see today," dos Santos said.

Collins said that economic expansion was a theme of his campaign for commissioners' president and the board of commissioners is committed to it as well.

"I think the idea of international trade, to many, is daunting," Collins said. "Many people view it as something really outside the scope of the ability of their businesses. But what we've stressed, and what I've learned, is there is potential opportunity for virtually every business because there may be some opportunity to tie into markets outside of the traditional markets that many business owners focus on."

Collins, who attended the international trade seminar in March, said that the internet has expanded trade opportunities for businesses of all sizes, and that he hoped Charles County businesses would take advantage of the opportunity to broaden their horizons.

"Looking at opportunities internationally ... opens the doors to tremendous opportunities for success," Collins said. "The World Wide Web ... creates a venue that opens the door to the entire world."

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