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Agency fosters sister city tie

Esperanza Unida hopes partnership will bring growth

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In an effort to boost economic development and help stay afloat, Esperanza Unida, with assistance from the City of Milwaukee, has reached across more than 5,400 miles to Turkey.

Earlier this month, the Common Council approved a sister-city partnership with Manisa, Turkey, at the request of Robert Miranda, executive director of Esperanza Unida, a south-side job training agency that has been having financial problems.

Shortly thereafter, Ald. James Witkowiak and Miranda set off for Istanbul to attend the first International Istanbul Symposium on Local Governance, which took place April 12 and 13.

Although Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett had been invited, he was unable to attend and sent Witkowiak in his place, along with a letter of introduction saying that "Robert Miranda will act as Mr. Witkowiak's official aide."

Witkowiak said the symposium was geared toward economic development and attended by 100 mayors from all over, including Ireland, Italy and Germany. Witkowiak delivered a speech discussing the economic possibilities that the sister-city partnership could provide.

"We want to forge relationships to see if we can open trade routes to Milwaukee and the U.S. from Turkey," Miranda said.

Witkowiak and Miranda said the trip for the two, including round-trip airplane tickets for \$1,700 each and their stay at the Conrad Hotel - a \$350 a night, five-star luxury hotel - was paid for by the Turkish government.

Miranda said Esperanza Unida started developing ties to Turkey a few years ago, largely because of Suleyman Kurter, a retired University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee professor who is from Turkey and a former chairman of the board of the agency.

The two have made two other trips to Turkey.

Miranda became director of Esperanza Unida two years ago while it was in turmoil after its founder and longtime director, Richard Oulahan, became disabled and couldn't continue to run the agency. Since then, the agency has struggled financially.

"For Esperanza Unida, this is about creating opportunity for us, not only to engage in possible trade with Turkey, but to get investments here and maybe open small businesses and create jobs and open training opportunities," Miranda said.

" There's also the possibility of opening up a tourism office or a trade mission office here "to engage more directly with the (Turkish) government," he said.

The sister-city partnership with Manisa is the fifth sister-city partnership for Milwaukee. The city has partnerships with Nuevitas, Cuba; Galway, Ireland; Morogoro, Tanzania; and uMhlathuze, South Africa.

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