



# Memorandum

**TO:** HONORABLE CITY COUNCIL

**FROM:** Mayor Liccardo

**SUBJECT:** SEE BELOW

**DATE:** 03/02/2022

Approved

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**SUBJECT: ACTIONS IN SUPPORT OF THE UKRAINIAN PEOPLE AND IN RESPONSE TO RUSSIA'S CRIMINAL MILITARY ACTION**

**RECOMMENDATION:**

1. Decline to suspend the sister city relationship with Yekaterinburg, aka Ekaterinburg, for the reasons described below.
2. Continue to express solidarity with the Ukrainian people through:
  - a. the lighting of the City Hall Rotunda, as Councilmembers Foley, Cohen, and now Arenas have urged.
  - b. supporting the resettlement of Ukrainian refugees in our city.
  - c. informing the Council and our retirement boards through an information memorandum whether our retirement funds have any investments in Russia, so that divestment of Russian assets may be considered.

**DISCUSSION:**

**Celebrating the Courage of the Citizens of Yekaterinburg**

According to [Radio Free Europe](#),

“Hundreds of anti-war protesters took to the streets of the Russian city of Yekaterinburg on February 26 to denounce their country’s military invasion of Ukraine. Chanting, “No to war,” many of the protesters said they were ashamed of their nation, and several were detained by police.”

We often lionize protesters in America for standing for principles we share, but too commonly fail to appreciate the greater courage that animates those global citizens who stand against despotic, authoritarian regimes. News accounts from Russia notoriously describe the [imprisonment](#), disappearance, and [poisoning](#) of those with the temerity to speak out against the Kremlin.

We should applaud the people of Yekaterinburg for their courage. Rather than seeking to “isolate” them, as Councilmember Arenas urges, we should forge stronger bonds with them, and support their dissent. The voice of the Russian people may provide the last, best hope for peace in Europe.

The New York Times reported that December 2021 surveys of [Russian public support for an invasion of Ukraine stood at 8 percent](#). Given the globally cataclysmic stakes of direct American intervention in armed conflict with Russia, the best deterrent to Vladimir Putin’s maniacal pursuit for a restoration of the Soviet empire will likely come from within. It is the Russian regime--and not the Russian people--that we must vehemently oppose.

I appreciate that Councilmember Arenas would like to “send a clear message,” as she told the media, by “ending our city’s formal diplomatic relationship with Russia’s municipal government in Ekaterinburg.” Yet we cannot really believe that our action will send a “clear message.” This Council’s action will never reach the faintest attention of Putin or his cronies, who have far greater concerns on their minds. Nor will it capture any public attention in Yekaterinburg; the sister city relationship between our two cities has been largely dormant for the last two decades, and Russian media remains tightly state-controlled. As with lighting our rotunda, we should all admit that this is a purely symbolic action. Unlike symbolic actions that might influence decisionmakers, it strains the imagination to understand how this one will.

### **Taking Symbolism Seriously: The Purpose and Principle of Sister Cities**

If we’re going to take purely symbolic actions, then we should take the symbolism seriously. The assertion that we’re “ending our city’s formal diplomatic relationship with Russia’s municipal government in Ekaterinburg” undermines the core principle of sister city relationships. That is, these are not relationships among municipal governments, but among global citizens. They serve to promote citizen diplomacy. The relationships do not exist for the benefit of City Hall--no matter how much councilmembers might enjoy taking international trips to sister cities—but rather are driven by residents for their benefit.

It goes without saying, of course, that sister city relationships do not exist for the benefit of *national* governments, either. They exist to promote dialogue despite, *and indeed, because of* the deep differences of national governments.

[That is, the very formation of sister cities arose from President Eisenhower’s 1956 conference on citizen diplomacy, at the height of the Cold War](#). The timing is instructive: in the same year, the Soviet military brutally crushed a Hungarian revolt against oppressive Communist rule, killing thousands of Hungarians and producing 200,000 refugees, while hostilities motivated by the Cold War were increasingly claiming lives from Poland to Guatemala to Vietnam.

Amid the deepening and increasingly violent divisions between national governments, global citizens conceived of a new avenue to peace: citizen diplomacy. Through sister cities, global citizens could overcome uneven, varying, and even belligerent relationships between national governments to forge personal relationships, improve communication, and exchange ideas that would, over time, plant seeds of peace within communities.

Rather than suspending a largely defunct sister-city relationship in an act of empty symbolism, we should encourage passionate, interested citizens of San Jose to revive our relationship—and our communication—with the citizens of Yekaterinburg. By sharing with them accounts from Western news outlets about the atrocities in the Ukraine, by hearing their struggles, and by encouraging their opposition to Russian aggression, we can accomplish far more.

## Moving On

Council Policy 0-11 provides that the Council:

“shall not act to or take a position on...[m]atters concerns the foreign policy of the United States of America nor its relationship to other countries of the world except at the expressed request of an elected official of the federal government....except those matters directly affect the City and citizenry of San Jose.”

Many reasons animate this policy. Our residents do not look to the city council to articulate positions on foreign policy; we have a President for that, and he’s doing a commendable job articulating our collective abhorrence to Russia’s invasion. Our residents *do* rely on our Council to focus our attention on those matters over which we have some influence—such as the homelessness, crime, and blight that afflict too many of our neighborhoods—rather than engaging in extensive public debates over pronouncements on matters beyond our control.

I encourage the Rules Committee to simply approve what it chooses and allow staff to do their work—in the Office of Immigrant Affairs, or through symbolic measures such as lighting the rotunda—rather than sending any of these items to Council, where they will consume hours debating the vagaries of our “policy” toward Russia, to little effect.