

## Mayor's Minute - August 29, 2019

This past Sunday I returned to Summerland after visiting Toyokoro, Japan, the District of Summerland's Sister City. The District has had this relationship with Toyokoro for 23 years.

According to Sister City International's website, a Sister City relationship is "a broad-based, long-term partnership between two cities in two countries". Sister City organizations "pursue activities and thematic areas that are important to their community including municipal, business, trade, educational, and cultural exchanges and projects" ([sistercity.org](http://sistercity.org)).

Personally, I was skeptical about the value of our Sister City relationship with Toyokoro (population approximately 3,000), specifically in the areas of business and trade. As it happens, these doubts were realized. Although Toyokoro is similar to Summerland in that agriculture contributes substantially to their economy (even more so than here, in fact), business and trade opportunities between the two communities do not exist.

Toyokoro is located on the island of Hokkaido, the northernmost and second largest island in Japan. It is separated from Honshu, the main island, by Tsugaru Strait; the two islands are connected by an undersea railway. The largest city on Hokkaido is Sapporo, the capital, with a population of almost two million. The Summerland delegation, which included 2019/20 Royalty, spent several days in Sapporo before going to Toyokoro.

The best part of the trip for me was the three-and-a-half days we spent in Toyokoro. The three Royalty stayed with host families, and joined the rest of the delegation (eleven in total) for parts of the tours and events. Among other things, we toured city hall, a seniors' home; nursery, elementary and junior high schools; attended the Welcome and Sayonara dinners; had a calligraphy lesson; participated in a Japanese tea ceremony; had a bus tour of Tokachi, the region in which Toyokoro is located; and some of us had a kimono-wearing experience.

I particularly enjoyed discussions about how their local government operates and about the substantial solar array installed a few minutes from City Hall.

Japanese society is considered collectivist, meaning that, generally, the Japanese people "place a great deal of importance on extended families and group loyalty" and "*may* employ less direct communication and more avoidance-style conflict resolution" (Martin & Nakayama, *Intercultural Communication in Contexts*, 2018, p. 100). These aspects of Japanese culture were, to some degree, evident during the ten days we spent in Japan, particularly the strength of familial relationships and the tendency to avoid eye contact.

I found many aspects of Japanese culture enlightening and refreshing, although not all. So, after a couple of days getting to know Mayor Miyaguchi's interpreter, I talked to her about my observations and received these responses: "Yes", Japan is still a very patriarchal society; "Yes", matters like substance abuse, mental health, and gender orientation are not discussed; and "Yes", ethnic discrimination, including against the Ainu (indigenous) people, exists; and "Yes" fair-coloured skin plays a role in social standing.

I feel that Canadians, including those in leadership roles, still have varying levels of growth to do in these matters as well. However, I was so pleased, especially as a woman of colour, to be the Mayor representing the people of Summerland.

As I wrote earlier in this Minute, I did not see how local business or trade benefits from our relationship with Toyokoro, but I *do* see value in a cultural exchange program for our youth. Mayor Miyaguchi, members of the Sister City Committee and I had a good discussion about how we can strengthen this aspect of the relationship between our communities. We all agree that the last twenty years have done

much to build a strong bond between our two communities. We also believe that evolving the program into a cultural exchange for youth (much like Toyokoro has done), would further strengthen the alliance and should be explored. Summerland Council will be discussing this matter further.

Thank you Council, Leanne Sieben (Chair) and the Sister City Committee, and Summerland for the opportunity to travel to Japan. Thanks, too, to previous Councils for your commitment to establish and grow a Sister City relationship with Toyokoro.

I look forward to welcoming the student delegation to Summerland in 2020. We may not be able to “out-gift” the Japanese, but I’m confident Summerland can “out-experience” our guests!