

Sister Cities of Durham



P. O. Box 767; Durham, NC 27702
www.sistercities-durham.com

To: Elaine O'Neal, Mayor of Durham, NC

From: Board of Directors of Sister Cities of Durham,
Tom Harris, President of Sister Cities of Durham

Subject: Recommendation to Suspend Durham's Sister Cities partnership
with Kostroma, Russia

Date: June 23, 2022

This message is in response to your request that the Sister Cities of Durham Board of Directors make a recommendation as to how the Durham City Council should respond to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's plea at the recent US Conference of Mayors that all American cities having a Russian Sister City terminate those relationships, such as Durham has with Kostroma, Russia.

As you are aware, shortly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, our Board issued a statement strongly condemning Russia's invasion and stating our support for Ukraine's independence. Nevertheless, we also stated our intent to maintain our Sister City ties to Kostroma based on the following rationale:

“Sister Cities of Durham reaffirms the value of our relationship with Kostroma, Russia. Over the past 30+ years, we have developed close friendships and mutual understanding. Our children, the next generation, have participated in student exchanges, worked at summer camps together and travelled the world together. Sister Cities of Durham remains fully committed to maintain these vital channels of communication between people. The goal of our citizen diplomats of all countries is to work to forge relationships that will ultimately lessen the possible use of war.

The path to world peace through citizen diplomacy is not an easy one. If it were, the Sister Cities movement, born in the height of the Cold War in the 1950s, might not be necessary. But it is. Despite what is sadly a horrific time, we remain committed, heart and soul, to maintaining progress along that path.”

However, much has changed since we made our initial decision. Russia's invasion has continued for four months, with no end in sight, and its aggression has resulted in the loss of many lives on both sides, including reports of atrocious executions of Ukrainian civilians by the Russian military. Moreover, our efforts to maintain ties to the residents of Kostroma have been frustrated by the divisive nature of the war. Thus, we now recommend that Durham send Russia a stronger message of condemnation of its war of aggression by suspending our Sister City relationship with Kostroma until meaningful communication with Sister City members can be restored. By suspension we mean that the City of Durham and Sister Cities of Durham shall cease any formal Sister City communications and relations, such as creating joint activities with Kostroma until suspension is lifted. It also includes clarification in all printed and virtual literature that the Kostroma Sister City relationship is suspended due to the negative effects on that relationship of Russia's ongoing violent aggression against Ukraine. We are unaware of any monetary costs to the City of Durham that would result from such a suspension.

We believe that suspension of the Sister City relationship is superior to terminating it because, while both actions will send Russia a strong critical message, suspension will more readily allow the City Council to resume the relationship when it determines that appropriate circumstances exist and, thus, allow citizen-to-citizen diplomacy to resume as early as possible. The Sister Cities of Durham Board, in consultation with our Kostroma City Committee, will closely monitor the situation and will make a recommendation to you, the Mayor, as to when it seems appropriate to restore the relationship.

Thank you for requesting and considering our recommendation.