



FRIENDSHIP/SISTER CITY APPLICATION

Garden Route District Municipality – City of Tacoma Partnership

Submitted to the Sister Cities Council of Tacoma

Applicant Information

Name and Country of Proposed Sister City: Garden Route District Municipality, Western Cape Province, Republic of South Africa

Partnering Organization: Garden Route District Municipality–Sister City Committee (GRDM-SCC), Tacoma, Washington

Date of Application: January 9, 2026

Person Requesting Relationship: Melannie Denise Cunningham, Founder & Advisor Emerita, GRDM-SCC

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1. Rationale and Focus of the Sister City Designation

A Strategic Evolution: From City to District Partnership

This application represents a strategic elevation of Tacoma's 28-year sister city relationship with George, South Africa—one of the longest-standing partnerships in the Sister Cities of Tacoma portfolio. At the invitation of regional leadership within the Garden Route District Municipality (GRDM), we are expanding from a single-city relationship to a comprehensive district-wide partnership encompassing seven municipalities and over 630,000 residents³ along South Africa's spectacular southern coast.

This transition mirrors the shift from a city-to-city model to a "county" model—much like moving from partnering with one city in Pierce County to engaging with the entire county. The Garden Route District serves as the coordinating government body for seven local municipalities, each with distinct economic strengths, cultural assets, and community needs that align closely with Tacoma and Pierce County's diversity.

Why This Partnership Benefits All Participants

For the Sister Cities Council of Tacoma: This partnership positions Tacoma at the forefront of Sister Cities International's Africa 500/5 initiative, which aims to create 500 new U.S.–Africa partnerships⁵ in five years. By expanding an established, successful relationship rather than starting from scratch, Tacoma demonstrates sophisticated international engagement and maximizes the return on nearly three

decades of relationship-building investment. The GRDM partnership also provides a replicable model for other U.S. cities seeking meaningful partnerships in Africa.

For the City of Tacoma: Tacoma gains access to seven distinct communities offering diverse collaboration opportunities in maritime commerce, tourism development, workforce training, and cultural exchange. The Port of Tacoma—part of the Northwest Seaport Alliance, which handles \$76 billion in waterborne trade annually¹—now has a direct counterpart in Mossel Bay, South Africa's emerging cruise port and maritime hub. This port-to-port connection creates tangible economic development pathways that benefit Tacoma businesses and workers.

For the Garden Route District: GRDM gains a proven American partner with deep institutional knowledge of South African communities, established trust relationships, and a track record of delivering direct community impact. With Tacoma's experience in maritime commerce, workforce development through institutions like Tacoma Community College and Bates Technical College, and a vibrant arts and cultural scene, this partnership addresses GRDM's strategic priorities in tourism diversification, skills development, and economic inclusion.

Garden Route District Media Release:

<https://www.gardenroute.gov.za/category/tacoma-sister-cities/>

Areas of Mutual Strength and Synergy

Port Cities & Maritime Commerce: The Port of Tacoma, as part of the Northwest Seaport Alliance, is the fourth-largest container gateway¹ in North America, supporting over 52,000 jobs¹ and generating \$14 billion in business output¹. Mossel Bay operates South Africa's smallest commercial port and is experiencing rapid growth—a new R22-million (\$1.2M USD) cruise facility² opened in November 2025, with 23 cruise ship arrivals² expected in 2025-26. Both communities understand the economic catalytic power of working waterfronts and the importance of diversifying maritime economies beyond traditional cargo.

Tourism & Destination Marketing: The Garden Route is South Africa's premier tourism corridor, attracting visitors to its dramatic coastline, indigenous forests, and world-class golf courses. Tacoma has emerged as a destination city, with the Museum District, Point Defiance, and growing culinary and arts scenes. Both regions face the challenge of seasonality—summer-heavy tourism that strains infrastructure and limits year-round employment. Joint strategies for shoulder-season programming, cultural tourism, and heritage experiences will benefit both communities.

Golf & Sports Diplomacy: The Garden Route is renowned as the "Golf Capital of South Africa," home to championship courses including Fancourt, Pezula, and Pinnacle Point. Tacoma and Pierce County boast exceptional public and private courses, including Chambers Bay, host of the 2015 U.S. Open⁴. Youth golf programs in both regions—including First Tee initiatives—provide natural pathways for youth exchange and leadership development through sport.

Jazz, Arts & Cultural Exchange: The MosJazz Music Festival in Mossel Bay has emerged as a signature Garden Route event, and the region celebrates vibrant arts festivals including the Knysna Oyster Festival and Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees (KKNK) in Oudtshoorn. Tacoma's jazz heritage, thriving arts community, and venues

like the Pantages Theater create natural platforms for cultural exchange, artist residencies, and collaborative programming.

Education & Youth Development: Both regions prioritize workforce development aligned with industry needs. GRDM operates the Garden Route Skills Mecca, a comprehensive skills development initiative, while Tacoma's community colleges and technical schools provide models for industry-responsive training. Youth unemployment remains a critical challenge in South Africa; strategic exchanges can build pathways, inspiration, and practical skills for young people in both communities.

2. Names, Titles, and Affiliations of Participants

From Tacoma, Washington (GRDM-SCC Leadership)

- **Tanajah Mims**, President
- **Erin Romero**, Vice President
- **Shellie Willis**, Treasurer
- **Donlisa Scott**, Secretary
- **Melannie Denise Cunningham**, Founder & Advisor Emerita
- **Thuli Lashaba**, Cultural Integrity Advisor

From Garden Route District Municipality, South Africa

- **Lusanda Menze**, Executive Manager, Planning & Economic Development
- **Nadiema Davids**, Legal Advisor/Manager, Legal Services, Planning & Economic Development

3. Contact Information

Tacoma, Washington

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4. Areas of Mutual Interest

The GRDM-SCC will focus programming and exchange activities in five strategic areas that leverage the strengths of both communities:

Tourism & Destination Development

Both Tacoma and the Garden Route are emerging destination communities working to diversify tourism offerings and extend visitor seasons. The Garden Route hosts

signature events including the Knysna Oyster Festival (July), MosJazz Music Festival (November-December), and the Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees arts festival in Oudtshoorn. Golf tourism is particularly significant—the Garden Route's championship courses attract players from around the world, directly paralleling Pierce County's golf assets including Chambers Bay.

Focus Areas: Joint destination marketing, jazz and cultural festival collaboration, golf tourism exchanges, development of heritage and reconciliation tourism products, and strategies to reduce seasonality through shoulder-season programming.

Education & Youth Engagement

The former Tacoma-George Sister City Committee delivered direct impact through education programs over 28 years, including providing more than 500 school uniforms to children across George and supporting literacy programs with personalized books for students. This proven model will now expand across all seven GRDM municipalities.

Focus Areas: Expansion of uniform and school supply programs district-wide, literacy and book donation programs, virtual classroom exchanges between schools, youth leadership delegations, First Tee and youth golf exchanges, STEM education partnerships, and career pathway development for young people in both communities.

Trade & Economic Development

The Garden Route District produces distinctive agricultural and artisanal products with export potential, including rooibos tea, honey, aloe products, ostrich leather goods, indigenous crafts, and processed foods. Tacoma's position as a major Pacific Rim trade gateway creates pathways for small-scale export development and business-to-business connections.

Focus Areas: Business delegation exchanges, trade missions connecting GRDM producers with Pacific Northwest markets, small business development technical assistance, entrepreneurship programming, and exploring fair trade certification pathways for Garden Route products.

Maritime & Port Collaboration

The emergence of Mossel Bay as a growing cruise port and maritime center creates unprecedented opportunities for port-to-port collaboration. The Port of Tacoma, as part of the Northwest Seaport Alliance, brings world-class expertise in maritime commerce, port operations, and waterfront economic development. Mossel Bay's November 2025 opening of a R22-million cruise facility signals the community's commitment to maritime diversification.

Focus Areas: Port administration exchanges, cruise tourism development strategies, maritime workforce training, ocean economy diversification, and connecting port-adjacent small businesses across both communities.

Workforce Development & Skills Training

Youth unemployment is among the most pressing challenges facing South African communities. GRDM has prioritized skills development through the Garden Route Skills Mecca initiative. Tacoma's community colleges, technical schools, and

apprenticeship programs offer models for industry-responsive training in hospitality, manufacturing, maritime services, and emerging sectors.

Focus Areas: TVET curriculum exchanges, hospitality and tourism micro-credentials, apprenticeship program development, digital skills training, and connecting students with employers in growth sectors.

5. Opportunities for New Activities and Potential Outcomes

Expanding from George to the full Garden Route District unlocks transformative new opportunities:

Port City Synergies: Tacoma and Mossel Bay

For the first time, Tacoma gains a true port-city partner in this relationship. Mossel Bay is strategically positioned on South Africa's southern coast, midway between Cape Town and Port Elizabeth. Its economy has historically centered on fishing, oil and gas (PetroSA refinery), and tourism. The port is experiencing a renaissance—23 cruise ships are scheduled for 2025-26², a new cruise facility is under development, and growing interest in diversifying the ocean economy. This mirrors Tacoma's evolution from an industrial port to a diversified maritime hub. Potential collaborations include port administration exchanges, cruise tourism development strategies, and connecting maritime businesses across both communities.

Agricultural Trade Development

The Garden Route and Klein Karoo produce distinctive agricultural products with strong export potential. Oudtshoorn anchors South Africa's ostrich industry, producing feathers, leather, and meat for global markets. The broader region produces rooibos tea, honey, aloe products, fynbos botanicals, dairy products, and artisanal foods. Through the Port of Tacoma's established trade networks and Pierce County's agricultural expertise, there are opportunities to develop small-scale export channels, support fair trade certification, and connect Garden Route producers with Pacific Northwest markets.

Expanded Youth Impact

Moving from one municipality to seven exponentially increases the reach of proven programs. The uniform program that served George students can now reach children across Bitou, Hessequa, Kannaland, Knysna, Mossel Bay, and Oudtshoorn. Youth golf exchanges can connect young people with programs across the district's world-class courses. Virtual classroom partnerships can connect schools across regions, building global competence and cross-cultural understanding for students who may never travel internationally.

Cultural Tourism & Heritage Experiences

The district's diversity creates opportunities for heritage tourism development. Oudtshoorn's Congo Caves and ostrich heritage, Knysna's indigenous forests and lagoon, Mossel Bay's role as the first European landfall in South Africa—these assets can be woven into tourism products that attract visitors year-round. Tacoma's heritage tourism development, museum district, and cultural institutions offer models and opportunities for collaboration.

Potential Outcomes

1. Establishment of bi-annual delegation exchanges between Tacoma and GRDM leadership
2. Launch of district-wide school uniform and literacy programs reaching all seven municipalities
3. Creation of virtual exchange programs connecting K-12 students across both regions
4. Development of golf diplomacy programming connecting youth players and First Tee programs
5. Trade mission connecting Garden Route agricultural producers with Pacific Northwest markets
6. Port-to-port partnership agreement between the Port of Tacoma and Mossel Bay Harbor
7. Joint cultural programming linking jazz, arts, and festival communities
8. Workforce development exchanges connecting community colleges and TVET institutions

6. Benefits and Measurable Results

Expected Benefits

1. **Enhanced Global Profile:** Tacoma strengthens its position as a globally engaged city with deep, authentic African partnerships—advancing Sister Cities International's Africa 500 initiative goals.
2. **Economic Development Pathways:** Direct business connections between Tacoma enterprises and GRDM businesses in tourism, trade, and maritime sectors create tangible economic benefits for both communities.
3. **Educational Impact:** Expanded programming reaches thousands of students across seven municipalities, building global competency and cross-cultural understanding.
4. **Cultural Enrichment:** Arts and cultural exchanges enhance the vibrancy of both communities while building lasting people-to-people connections.
5. **Model for Replication:** This district-level partnership model can inform other U.S. cities seeking to deepen African engagement through strategic expansion of existing relationships.

Measurable Indicators of Success

- **Youth Engagement:** Number of students participating in virtual exchanges, uniforms distributed, books donated
- **Delegation Activity:** Annual delegations sent and hosted, professional exchanges completed
- **Business Connections:** Number of B2B meetings facilitated, trade inquiries generated
- **Cultural Programming:** Joint events produced, artist exchanges completed, audience reached
- **Membership Growth:** GRDM-SCC membership expansion, engagement levels, volunteer hours

- **Media Coverage:** Press coverage in both regions highlighting partnership activities and impact

7. Resources

Current Funding Model

The GRDM-SCC operates as a volunteer-led nonprofit organization sustained primarily through membership dues, with additional support from sponsorships, grants, and fundraising activities as the organization grows.

Membership Dues Structure (Annual)

- Individual Members: \$100
- Youth Members (under 21): \$20
- Nonprofit Organizations: \$250
- Businesses: \$1,500
- Government/Tribal Entities: \$1,500

Current Status & Year 1 Membership Target

Current Membership: 8 founding members

Year 1 Target: 15 members at varying levels

Projected Year 1 Membership Revenue (15 Members)

- 10 Individual Members @ \$100 = \$1,000
- 2 Youth Members @ \$20 = \$40
- 2 Nonprofit Organizations @ \$250 = \$500
- 1 Business Member @ \$1,500 = \$1,500

Projected Membership Dues: \$3,040

Projected Annual Operating Budget (Year 1)

- **Membership Dues:** \$3,000
- **Sponsorships:** \$2,000–\$3,000 (local businesses, event sponsors)
- **Fundraising Events:** \$1,500–\$2,500 (annual gathering, cultural events)
- **Small Grants:** \$1,000–\$2,000 (community foundations, SCI mini-grants)
- **In-Kind Contributions:** \$2,000+ (meeting space, professional services, supplies)

Total Year 1 Target: \$10,000–\$12,500

Future Funding Sources (Years 2+)

- Sister Cities International programmatic grants
- Corporate partnerships as programming expands
- Delegation participant fees for travel programming
- Community foundation and public diplomacy grants

8. Profile of the Garden Route District Municipality

Overview

The Garden Route District Municipality (GRDM) is located in the Western Cape Province of South Africa, stretching along approximately 300 kilometers of the country's spectacular southern coastline. With a population exceeding 630,000³ and a Gross Domestic Regional Product of R46.2 billion³ (roughly \$2.5 billion USD³), GRDM is among South Africa's most economically vibrant districts. The region outpaced national economic growth³ in 2023, driven by agriculture, manufacturing, and tourism.

The district encompasses dramatic geographic diversity—from the Indian Ocean coastline through indigenous forests to the semi-arid Klein Karoo interior. This diversity supports a range of economic activities: coastal tourism, maritime commerce, forestry and wood products, agriculture (including the world's ostrich capital), and a growing creative economy.

The Seven Municipalities

George Municipality (Pop. ~220,000): The district's administrative and commercial hub, George serves as the regional services center with a diversified economy in manufacturing, business services, education, and tourism. George Airport provides the region's primary air connection.

Mossel Bay Municipality (Pop. ~130,000): South Africa's historic first European landfall (1488), Mossel Bay combines coastal tourism, commercial fishing, and the PetroSA refinery. The port is experiencing a renaissance as a cruise destination with a new R22-million facility² opened in 2025.

Knysna Municipality (Pop. ~85,000): Famous for its dramatic lagoon, indigenous forests, and the iconic Knysna Heads, this creative community hosts the annual Oyster Festival and Pink Loerie Arts Festival. The economy centers on tourism, creative industries, and artisanal enterprises.

Bitou Municipality (Plettenberg Bay) (Pop. ~65,000): An upscale tourism destination known for pristine beaches, whale watching, and adventure tourism. Plett's Nature's Valley anchors the Tsitsikamma section of the Garden Route National Park.

Oudtshoorn Municipality (Pop. ~100,000): Capital of the Klein Karoo and the global ostrich industry, Oudtshoorn's unique Karoo heritage attracts visitors to the Cango Caves, ostrich farms, and the celebrated KKNK arts festival.

Hessequa Municipality (Pop. ~55,000): A rural municipality blending coastal communities (Still Bay, Witsand) with agricultural centers. The economy relies on dairy farming, grains, fynbos harvesting, and emerging nature-based tourism.

Kannaland Municipality (Pop. ~25,000): The district's smallest and most rural municipality, centered on the historic town of Ladismith. Kannaland represents the traditional Karoo with stock farming, niche agriculture, and heritage tourism potential.

Key Economic Sectors

- **Tourism & Hospitality:** The district's primary economic driver, supporting hotels, restaurants, tour operators, and related services
- **Agriculture & Agri-Processing:** Ostrich, dairy, fruit, vegetables, aloe, rooibos, and honey production

- **Forestry & Wood Products:** Indigenous and plantation forests supporting furniture, construction, and craft industries
- **Maritime & Ocean Economy:** Commercial fishing, port operations, oil & gas, and emerging cruise tourism
- **Creative Industries:** Film, design, crafts, and cultural production

9. Additional Information

A Mature Partnership Ready for Expansion

This application represents the strategic evolution of one of Tacoma's longest-standing international partnerships. Since 1997, Tacoma has maintained a sister city relationship with George, South Africa—nearly three decades of continuous engagement, cultural exchange, and direct community impact.

The expansion to a district-wide partnership was initiated by Garden Route District Municipality leadership, who recognized the value of Tacoma's proven track record and invited us to extend our successful model across all seven municipalities. This invitation reflects the trust and respect built over 28 years of authentic relationship-building.

From the beginning, the vision for this partnership has emphasized grassroots impact—reaching communities most in need of support while creating meaningful opportunities for economic development and cultural exchange. This vision aligns perfectly with the GRDM-SCC's commitment to building bridges between people, not just governments.

Alignment with Sister Cities International Africa Region Priorities

This partnership directly advances Sister Cities International's strategic priorities, including the SCI Africa Region 500/5 initiative launched at the SCI Africa Summit. By expanding and deepening an established U.S.–Africa partnership, Tacoma demonstrates leadership in meaningful international engagement. The GRDM-SCC model—elevating the city-to-district partnership—offers a template for other American cities seeking to maximize the impact of their African relationships.

Governance and Sustainability

The GRDM-SCC has adopted comprehensive bylaws establishing clear governance structures, including a diverse Board of Directors with designated roles for cultural integrity, youth representation, and institutional continuity. Monthly membership meetings, quarterly board meetings, and seven municipality-specific committees ensure active engagement and distributed leadership. The organization is structured for long-term sustainability, with multiple revenue streams and a succession planning framework built into its governance model.

Commitment to Impact

The GRDM-SCC is committed to measurable, meaningful impact in both communities. We will maintain transparent reporting of activities and outcomes, seek feedback from community stakeholders, and continuously refine our programming to maximize benefit. Our guiding principle is that every exchange, every program, and

every initiative should create genuine value for the people of Tacoma, Pierce County, and the Garden Route District.

We respectfully request the Sister Cities Council of Tacoma's approval this Friendship/Sister City designation, and we look forward to building on 28 years of partnership to create even greater impact across both communities.

Respectfully submitted,

Melannie Denise Cunningham, MBA

Founder & Advisor Emerita

Garden Route District Municipality–Sister City Committee

January 9, 2026

SOURCES AND CITATIONS

Port and Trade Statistics

¹ Northwest Seaport Alliance Cargo Statistics (2024): 'The Northwest Seaport Alliance handled nearly \$76 billion of waterborne trade with 176 trading partners globally in 2024. Marine cargo operations at NWSA facilities support over 52,000 jobs and drives \$14 billion in business output.' Source: <https://www.nwseaportalliance.com/about-us/cargo-statistics>

Mossel Bay Cruise Tourism

² Transnet National Ports Authority (November 2025): The R22 million Cruise Recreation Facility opened November 14, 2025. 'During the previous season, the port recorded 21 cruise vessel calls carrying over 13,000 passengers... 23 cruise vessel calls planned for the 2025/26 season.'

Sources:

- Travel and Tour World, November 15, 2025:

<https://www.travelandtourworld.com/news/article/mossel-bay-cruise-port-opens-more-than-twenty-million-rand-worth-of-facility/>

- Southern & East African Tourism Update, November 14, 2025:

<https://www.tourismupdate.com/article/mossel-bay-opens-new-cruise-facility>

Garden Route District Municipality Demographics and Economy

³ Western Cape Provincial Treasury, 2023 Socio-Economic Profile: Garden Route District population and economic data. Regional GDP reached R45.08-46.2 billion in 2023. Source: <https://www.westerncape.gov.za/treasury/> (Garden Route District Municipality SEP-LG 2023)

Golf and Sports

⁴ Chambers Bay Golf Course hosted the 2015 U.S. Open Championship, June 18-21, 2015. Owned by Pierce County, Washington. Sources: <https://chambersbaygolf.com/2015-u-s-open/> and USGA records.

Sister Cities International Africa Initiative

⁵ Sister Cities International '500 in 5' Initiative: 'In the next five years, we are on a mission to connect 500 cities in Africa with other cities in the United States.' Launched at the SCI Africa Summit in Cape Town, February 2023. Source: <https://sistercities.org/500-in-5/>

Garden Route District Municipality Official Communications

⁶ GRDM Media Release on Tacoma Sister Cities Partnership: <https://www.gardenroute.gov.za/category/tacoma-sister-cities/>