

# A meeting of minds for Silicon sisters

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We all know we like to think of ourselves as a small European Silicon Valley - but what does the real Silicon Valley think of us?

I had the chance to put a few questions last week to a Valley delegation over from San Jose as part of regular exchanges with the Dublin San Jose Sister City programme (find out more at [www.sanjosedublin.org](http://www.sanjosedublin.org)).

It has been two years since the Americans came here. The two cities have been paired for 20 years, an initiative that began back in the days when Bertie Ahern was lord mayor (for yes, it was he who set up the initial programme with then-San Jose mayor, Tom McEnergy).

Two decades later the relationship has, according to various business people and academics, been an extremely useful way of forging connections between Ireland Inc and Silicon Valley companies on the technology and biotechnology front, as well as for academic and cultural exchanges in both directions.

The organisation has also been a key forum for discussion to continue about getting a direct Aer Lingus flight to San Jose or San Francisco - the two airports have been in hot competition for this link - though no decision has been made by the airline.

Apparently, the final move depends on the Open Skies agreement but there is little doubt that a new direct flight will open to the US west coast, a route that would facilitate better business connections than currently exist with Valley companies.

I have absolutely no doubt that such a connection (whether it be through Aer Lingus or another operator) would enhance investment opportunities in both directions and help boost the visibility of Irish technology companies, a point noted in a previous conversation I had with David Oliver, an Irishman who is the San Jose-based president of the San Jose Dublin Sister City organisation.

This past week he led a diverse group to Dublin. They comprised San Jose councillors, a police officer, business people, university representatives and others.

But what can San Jose get out of a trip to Dublin? "We're trying to understand how we can leverage this relationship in the future," says Forrest Williams, a San Jose city council member.

In particular, he notes that because of connections through the sister city programme, San Jose will work to help give logistics support to Irish companies interested in Silicon Valley.

"For example, we feel we have expertise in the area of venture capital, education, innovation and entrepreneurship, and we want to share that." On the flip side, he says Dublin and Ireland provide a door into a global market at a point where companies are globalising.

Councillor Nancy Pyle agrees: "We have a segue into Ireland and Europe through this relationship, and [Irish companies] do to the US through us."

Melinda Richter, executive director of the San Jose Biocenter, a biotech incubator, says that she has been interested in talking to bioscience companies here to let them know that San Jose can help them set up lab and research space, supply useful connections to research institutes for example, and to perform introductions.

"What San Jose offers is a short cut to that system." But she is also impressed at what is happening in Ireland on the bioscience front, and notes: "I think there's much more opportunity to have a beneficial relationship that moves back and forth."

Carmen Ziegler, provost and vice-president for academic affairs at San Jose State University, is very interested in furthering higher education connections. "Our graduates need to be global citizens," she says.

"The relationship between the cities helps us to look at opportunities to study in Ireland - and for Irish students to come to San Jose."

She says the fact that so many global companies - and in particular Silicon Valley technology companies - do business in Ireland or are based here means that Ireland could be in a position to provide ideal working internships for students.

Some of the delegates, who have been here in the past, expressed astonishment at the changes in Dublin from previous visits.

Ziegler, who was last here 12 years ago, says: "What dramatic changes!"

She is particularly struck by how Ireland has reversed the brain drain. "So many of your Irish-educated professionals lived abroad and came back," she says, adding that this helps contribute to a more open and international-thinking workforce.

Williams says he was impressed by the inter-relationships between organisations. "It's been a real eye-opener for us, to see the commitment, between the universities, the Government, the VCs - everyone is on the same page."

All four commented on the friendliness and warmth of Irish people - an indication that, though the general population may fear that although we are losing some of these qualities, they are still coming through strongly to visitors as a real Irish asset.

They all remarked on Ireland's new cultural diversity and what Richter calls the subsequent "vibrancy" of Dublin's streets, businesses and universities - broadly welcomed by all as a sign that the country is more open and global.

Perhaps more significantly, they feel Ireland's growing multiculturalism will make the nation more attractive as home to an international pool of employees, particularly in the highly diverse technology sector.

When I asked if they believed the cultural diversity that they see here now - in contrast to what was described as our "homogeneity" on visits years ago - would be a factor in encouraging companies to invest and base themselves here and in encouraging Silicon Valley employees to move here, they answer as one: "Yes."

Richter adds: "This is a global city now. And we've definitely been converted as ambassadors to what Dublin has to offer."