

# Clinton and Zarafshan continue developing sister city relationship

By Sherry Lucas

A whirlwind visit just prior to the holiday season by the mayor from Zarafshan, Uzbekistan, and the attaché to the Uzbek ambassador to the U.S. further cemented ties between Clinton and its sister city on the other side of the globe.

It was a chance to showcase the city's prime business and education assets, as well as highlight the region.

"I think it's a valuable asset to Clinton to have an international sister city, and have that connection," said Clinton Mayor Phil Fisher. "Continental Tire, a company that was founded in Germany, gives us a little bit of that foreign appeal. It's important that we have that kind of appeal as much as possible." The partnership presents an exciting opportunity for mutual benefit, "for both to grow and both to learn from each other."

Clinton's Sister Cities International partnership with Zarafshan is in conjunction with the Mississippi National Guard and is part of a larger coordinated effort with the Mississippi Development Authority to foster global trade with Uzbekistan. The sister city partnership was officially signed last May.

"It shows that we're a city that's looking further than just the metro area, further than just the middle of the state," Fisher said. "We're reaching across state boundaries and country boundaries to expand our horizons."

Uzbekistan, a mountainous and desert Central Asian nation and former Soviet republic,

is part of the Silk Road. Cotton is a primary crop (possible with irrigation), and Uzbekistan is also a natural gas exporter and has significant gold reserves.

"It's an ancient area there," said Fisher, who visited Uzbekistan last May. "Their history goes well back in time. They're proud of their history and of their culture," with many historical artifacts preserved through time, even through the Soviet bloc era. "They're an entrepreneurial country,



interested in growth.

"Zarafshan is a growing city," Fisher said, keen on development and with the gold market going for them and a couple of textile businesses, "they're doing very well."

Manufacturing and logistics, agriculture, education and trade initiatives are points of interest in the international tie.

Mayor Anvar Radjabov of Zarafshan and Col. Muzafar Rakhmatullaev came to Clinton last fall, meeting with Continental Tire; McNeely Plastics; Taylor Power; Gulf Relay Logistics; Clinton Public Schools; Mississippi College's Office of Global Education; Clinton City leaders, including the mayor and Director of Economic Development Gabriel Prado; and Mississippi Agriculture Commissioner Andy Gipson.

On Fisher's earlier visit to Zarafshan, he'd been impressed by a school visit, where children he met spoke English, and the Uzbek mayor's goal of an English speaking school.

"Wouldn't it be grand if we could do a student exchange, from high school or the college system?" Fisher said. "There are all kinds of cultural possibilities."

The Uzbek visitors' school tours spurred curiosity and questions in Clinton, too.

"Really awesome," Eastside Elementary Principal Mandy Taylor described interactions with Uzbek visitors Radjabov and Rakhmatullaev. Students had researched Uzbek culture



and made artwork to share as gifts. Visitors were surprised and charmed that the children would take that much time, get to know their art, and make something "with a little bit of Clinton kick," Taylor said of designs modeled after Uzbek patterns, with the addition of a Clinton arrow. A fifth grade ACCENT class displayed a welcome flag in their language to greet the Uzbek visitors.

School safety upgrades such as a fire door, and features such as flexible seating (yoga balls, wobble stools, standing desks, etc.) in some classrooms sparked interest. Leslie Alexander, assistant principal at Northside Elementary, said questions also explored how 1:1 technology is funded, the types of applications students use on their devices, and the soft lighting used in many classrooms.

"They also had questions about the 'In God We Trust' signs that are required by law to be hung in every classroom," Alexander said, as well as teacher credentials and library practices.

"Overall, I think they were impressed with the setup of the school and the welcoming environment," Alexander said.

The friendly Uzbek visitors showed great interest in forming a collaborative partnership with Mississippi College, said Mei-Chi Piletz, executive director of the Office of Global Education at MC.

"Right now, they have three universities in the city. However, they're in the process of establishing another

university that is totally in English," with hopes of faculty and student exchange to come. They discussed drafting a memorandum of understanding, the first step in that direction, and the visitors remarked on how much their students would like MC's beautiful campus.

Visits to manufacturers provided a big-picture look of how business operates, Fisher said. With his Uzbek counterpart's visits to Continental Tire, McNeely Plastics, Gulf Relay and more, "He saw different varieties of industrial and trucking relationships, and it gave him a good idea of how we function and how we operate."

City workings were a topic of mutual concern for the two mayors, as he and Fisher talked of such universal city problems as "dogs and ditches and draining issues," Fisher said. "It all boils down to working with people, and trying to do the best you can to satisfy as much as you can."

In addition to business, education and municipal tours, "The mayor of our sister city got to see the U.S.," Fisher said. "We carried him to Vicksburg, and he saw the Mississippi River, which was overwhelming. ... Their water is piped to them." That jaunt also included a stop by the Biedenharn Coca-Cola Museum and a Coke float. "They were totally fascinated by the Coca-Cola history."

Chicken and dumplings and an introduction to grits also fed into the cultural exchange.

A followup letter from Col. Muzafar Rakhmatullaev called the visit "a wonderful and productive time" and praised Clinton's friendly citizenry, impressive educational institutions, clean streets and modern parks.

"We need to learn from Clinton," Fisher said he hopes that, come spring and summer, he can arrange a visit with business representatives and people in Clinton's artistic community to see what connections can be made. He and his Uzbek counterpart will find their mutual strengths and determine what they can move forward with, together, for the benefit of each.

"I actually would very much like for both Clinton and Zarafshan to become tourist destinations.... Right now, we're at the point where there's a lot of things we can accomplish. We may not know what they are, but we're getting there." Educational exchange, artisan imports and Uzbekistan's interest in big industry are all part of the conversation.

"We want to help them become as good as they can be," Fisher said. "In turn, we profit from the cultural exchange, and the idea of making both cities a better place."

