

OFFICIAL MAYORAL VISIT TO KORCE, ALBANIA

At the Ordinary Council meeting of September 17th, Council resolved to approve a Mayoral visit to Korce, Albania to attend a Sister City signing ceremony and publicly formalize the Sister City relationship and Memorandum of Understanding. On Wednesday 25th of September I travelled to Albania as a result of the Greater Shepparton City Council's acceptance of an invitation from the Mayor of Korce to send the Mayor to participate in a formal signing event. This report outlines the activities I was involved in during my time in Albania.

This visit recognized the importance of and respect for the significant Albanian community now living in Greater Shepparton and their contribution to this area during nearly 100 years. Shepparton is home for many different nationalities as a result of extensive migration. Albanian migrants were one of the earliest groups to arrive and settle here and there are currently more than three thousand people in our community who can lay claim to Albanian heritage. Most of the Albanian families in Shepparton came from Korce. The original wave of migration took place in the 1920's and, following the fall of Communist rule in Albania, another wave of migration from Korce occurred in the 1990's because of long established family contacts in Shepparton.

I believe it would be reasonably accurate to state that a majority of people in Greater Shepparton have little knowledge of the history and connections of the local Albanian community. The visit has certainly increased my own understanding about the reasons why so many families from Korce migrated to this area as well as having a greater appreciation of the values and traditions still upheld and practiced by the Shepparton Albanian community. It was interesting to find that there is already a constant flow of Albanians between Korce and Shepparton and in itself that is a valuable aspect of visitor tourism for Greater Shepparton. Many people who I met in Korce had visited Shepparton. There were others I met there who had travelled from Shepparton to Korce specifically for the Sister City formalities.

This visitor experience between the two cities could be expanded. For Greater Shepparton residents looking for a new and interesting tourism experience, Albania, and in particular Korce, would be well worth considering. Our Sister City Korce is a city transitioning from the days of the former communist regime to a modern and vibrant place. The result is a city of interesting contrasts. New quality built infrastructure such as roads, buildings, a huge central pedestrian precinct, churches, museums, restaurants and hotels sit beside dilapidated infrastructure, a legacy of the time of harsh Communist rule. Korce is the centre of Arts and Culture in Albania and its history is fascinating. Korce Council has a strong Tourism Department which is concentrating on developing tourism to attract international visitors.



The Sister City ceremony was held at the Korce Council building. I was met at the entrance to the building by the Mayor of Korce, Mr Sotirag Filo, and four local children in Albanian National dress. The ceremony was attended by several people from the Albanian community in Greater Shepparton. Formalities included greetings and speeches by the two Mayors, recognition of the importance of the Sister City agreement including the stated objectives, and the exchange of gifts. The event was covered by the Korce television station.

Following this there was a walking tour of the central city area to see and learn about Korçe's new infrastructure projects, a visit to a museum which was the very first school in Albania and a viewing of a collection of priceless religious paintings and icons. Later on we joined Mayor Filo for a Classical Music concert in a heritage building and then completed the day of celebration with a dinner of delicious traditional Albanian food with the Mayor, the CEO, Korçe Council department managers and a group of people from Greater Shepparton.



Korçe Pedestrian Precinct

On that day, and for each day of the entire visit, I used the Greater Shepparton Mayor's Twitter page to post information. This included comments and photographs. As a point of difference from other Mayoral visits in the past, where residents are generally not able to know and understand what is happening during Sister City visits, I found this social media tool very useful and hopefully interesting to those who were following. I am aware that this Twitter information was being accessed by people from Greater Shepparton and, in particular, people from our local Albanian community.

Following the visit to Korce I travelled to Tirane, the capital city of Albania, for a second formal event. This was organized by Jennifer Bloomfield, the Australian Ambassador to Albania and was an Australian Government sponsored event called 'Australia Day'. It was designed to showcase aspects of Australia to the Albanian nation whilst highlighting the Australian/Albanian connections which exist.



Ambassador Bloomfield, Jenny Houlihan, Prince Leka of Albania

The recently signed Sister City relationship between Korce and Greater Shepparton fitted into this concept and I was therefore invited to make a speech. The event was a Cocktail Party attended by Ambassador Bloomfield and the Deputy Prime Minister of Albania Niko Peleshi, who was the Mayor of Korce when the Korce/Greater Shepparton Sister City relationship was first proposed. Ambassadors from several other countries, Prince Leka of Albania, a delegation from Shepparton and representatives from several large corporations also attended. The keynote speaker was Judge Rauf Soulio from the District Court of South Australia. Judge Soulio has Albanian Heritage and was born in Shepparton.

My speech concentrated on the contributions of Albanians to the Shepparton area and the importance of developing mutual goodwill, support and partnership opportunities. I have included a short excerpt:

The Shepparton region has been good to the Albanian people and the Albanian community has been, in turn, good for Shepparton. That early drive to work hard and succeed was a characteristic of the young Albanians who first arrived and is still seen today.

There is such a bright future for our two countries.

We should continue to work together to make the most of our rich heritage, resources and opportunities. Australian industries are now establishing in Albania and with such beautiful landscapes in the mountains and along the coast the potential for developing tourism is strong. I know that Australians, who love to travel and are always looking for new places to see, would love to come here and explore your beautiful country.

We share the vision and have the potential to develop industries consistent with a clean green theme. Shepparton is an agricultural and manufacturing area known as the Food Bowl of Australia. We are looking to provide clean and healthy food to the world, particularly into Asia. There are many Albanian people in Shepparton who play an important part in this.

As with most Sister City relationships, the strength and effectiveness which flow from it are driven by the community from both cities. One advantage which will provide strength to this particular relationship is the long history of Albanian migration to this area and the large number of Albanian people already living here on a permanent basis and who are well established, socially and economically. There is strong leadership within this community, prepared to drive future action.

Dinny Adem is the local Albanian community leader who initiated the Sister City relationship, made the necessary contacts in both municipalities and then organized most of the activities associated with my visit. I would like to thank him most sincerely for his initiative and hardwork.

Building goodwill, gaining knowledge, setting up networks and establishing positive relationships through personal contact is essential if Sister City relationships are to benefit their participating communities. The recent Mayoral visit to Korce and Tirane was a means of furthering these objectives. I appreciate the fact that Councillors recognized this by agreeing to accept the invitations from the Korce Mayor and the Australian Ambassador to Albania. We look forward to continuing and strengthening the Greater Shepparton/Korce relationship.



Dinny Adem, Jenny Houlihan, Niko Peleshi Deputy Prime Minister