

**DUBLIN CITY COUNCIL  
WORK SESSION  
MAY 18, 2026**

**Minutes**

Mayor Amorose Grooms called the Monday, May 18, 2026 work session to order at 6:00 p.m.

Council members present: Ms. Alutto, Mayor Amorose Grooms, Vice Mayor De Rosa, Ms. Johnson, Mr. Keeler, Ms. Krumb and Dr. Lam.

Staff present: Ms. O'Callaghan, Ms. Weisenauer, Mr. Gracia, Ms. Richison, Chief Paez, Ms. Blake, Ms. Hunter, Mr. Jiang, Ms. Goliver, Mr. Batchelor and Mr. Rubino.

Others present: Mark Owens, Honorary Consul General for Ireland in Ohio.

Mayor Amorose Grooms invited Mr. Owens to lead the Pledge of Allegiance.

**Friendship – Sister Cities Discussion**

Ms. O'Callaghan introduced the topic, noting that staff had been seeking Council feedback and direction on Dublin's current and future friendship and sister city relationships. She summarized that since the 2024 Council retreat, staff had continued benchmarking regional and national peers, evaluating how international relationships support economic development, and examining various structural models used by other communities. The two existing Friendship City relationships — with Mashiko, Japan, and Dublin, Ireland — have historically been rooted in cultural exchange, education, arts, and community connections. She stated that Council would later be asked to weigh-in on three specific questions: whether to transition the Dublin, Ireland relationship from a Friendship City to a Sister City designation; whether to explore additional relationships, particularly in Japan; and whether to adopt a more formal policy framework and evaluation rubric to guide future international engagement.

Ms. Weisenauer provided background on both existing relationships. The Friendship City Agreement with Mashiko, Japan, was executed in December 2015 and grew out of cultural ties centered on Taiko drumming and ceramic pottery. Shortly after, Council created the International Friendship City Association, which subsequently initiated the relationship with Dublin, Ireland. A Friendship City agreement with Dublin, Ireland was signed at the Dublin Irish Festival in August 2017, and that agreement was renewed in 2023 for an additional four years, with exchanges covering culture, smart cities initiatives and citizen engagement. The Friendship Association was dissolved by Council in 2021, and no replacement committee structure was established at that time.

Ms. Weisenauer also presented regional and national benchmarking. Locally, Columbus and Franklin County operate through the Greater Columbus Sister Cities International, a nonprofit with representation from the mayor's office, Franklin County, Ohio State University, and other stakeholders. Marysville, Delaware, and Worthington each maintain their own committee-based structures for managing sister and friendship city relationships. Nationally, peer cities identified as part of Dublin's competitive set for economic development — including Austin, Charlotte, Nashville, Houston, and Cincinnati — maintain between 7 and 17 sister city relationships.

Mr. Gracia connected the discussion to Dublin's recently adopted economic development strategy, which specifically calls for attracting international research and development locations within key

industry clusters. He noted that Japan represents Dublin's largest source of foreign direct investment, largely attributable to Honda and associated manufacturers. JobsOhio maintains economic development consultants in Canada, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Korea, Spain, and Taiwan. The regional partner, One Columbus, focuses its strongest foreign direct investment efforts on Canada, France, Germany, Japan, and the United Kingdom. Mr. Gracia also reported that the week prior, Dublin hosted a dinner for JobsOhio international business consultants from India, Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea — a direct outgrowth of Dublin's standing as a destination for Asian business investment. He emphasized the need to balance business opportunity with cultural connection, and noted that Dublin currently runs targeted digital advertising campaigns in those peer cities to attract businesses in aligned industry sectors.

Mark Owens, Honorary Consul General of Ireland for Ohio, then spoke to the specific opportunity with Dublin, Ireland. He drew on his professional experience with JobsOhio and his involvement with the Cleveland Sister Cities program to frame his remarks. He stated that the most successful sister city relationships are those anchored in economic development as the primary pillar, with higher education and cultural exchange serving as supporting elements. He cautioned that relationships built purely on cultural ceremony tend to fail over time, as he had observed in Cleveland where many sister city ties have produced little beyond ceremonial events.

Mr. Owens outlined three pillars for a successful Dublin, Ohio — Dublin, Ireland sister city relationship.

- First, economic development: he noted that Ireland, a country of approximately 5.5 to 6 million people, ranks fifth in foreign direct investment into the United States, supporting nearly 150,000 direct American jobs. He expressed frustration that Ohio has not captured a larger share of that investment and identified the sister city framework as a vehicle for positioning Dublin, Ohio as a gateway for Irish and European companies seeking US expansion. He also referenced the newly established Ohio-Ireland Trade Commission, signed into law by the Governor, of which Mr. Owens serves as chair, with economic development as its top priority.
- Second, higher education: Mr. Owens cited an active student exchange program between Ohio State University and Ulster University in Derry as an example of the growing educational connections forming between Ohio and Ireland. He also noted the direct flight between Cleveland and Dublin, Ireland, operating six days per week, as a practical enabler of these exchanges.
- Third, cultural exchange: Mr. Owens pointed to the Dublin Irish Festival, the City's strong Irish identity, and the Abbey Theatre as natural connectors. He noted that a formal sister city designation, as opposed to a friendship city partnership, creates genuine accountability by assigning specific responsibilities to named individuals on both sides of the relationship, rather than leaving the relationship to exist on paper without active stewardship.

Mr. Owens indicated that Dublin City Council in Ireland has its own criteria for evaluating sister city candidates, and offered to share that matrix with Dublin, Ohio staff. He also noted that the Irish ambassador to the United States has visited Dublin, Ohio and is aware of the potential for an elevated relationship, though her term is expected to conclude in August, suggesting that timing is relevant.

Following the presentations, Council engaged in a discussion structured around the three staff-posed questions.

On the question of transitioning the Dublin, Ireland Friendship City relationship to a Sister City designation, Council members were broadly supportive. Dr. Lam expressed enthusiasm, noting the strong alignment between Dublin, Ireland's leading industries — technology, software development, digital health, medical technologies, renewables, and environmental sciences — and Dublin, Ohio's own economic development targets. He also noted that his family had experienced a lack of educational exchange opportunities, making that aspect of the relationship personally relevant. Mr. Keeler expressed support for formalizing the relationship and indicated interest in ensuring that cultural and community exchange dimensions are preserved alongside the economic development focus. Ms. Krumb also expressed support for transitioning the Dublin, Ireland relationship, while indicating reservations about transitioning the Mashiko relationship without first applying an evaluation rubric. Vice Mayor De Rosa was supportive of moving forward with Dublin, Ireland, but counseled a measured approach, noting that the large peer cities used for benchmarking have populations exceeding one million and proportionately larger staff capacity. She recommended learning from the Dublin, Ireland relationship before expanding further. Ms. Johnson agreed, supporting the transition with Dublin, Ireland while favoring a hold on the Japan relationship and any expansion until criteria are established. Mayor Amorose Groomes concurred with the consensus, adding that during a personal visit to Ireland the previous summer, she had met with the Lord Mayor and city staff and observed a genuine kinship between the two cities rooted in more than just a shared name.

On the question of exploring additional relationships, particularly in Japan, Council was more cautious. Mr. Owens noted that given JobsOhio's substantial investment in the Japanese market, maintaining the existing Mashiko friendship relationship costs Dublin little and preserves a useful connection. Several Council members agreed it would be prudent to retain the Mashiko relationship for the time being without elevating it, while deferring any expansion until the city had established its evaluation framework and gained experience through the Dublin, Ireland sister city process.

On the question of establishing a formal committee structure to oversee international engagement, Council was generally not supportive of creating a new committee. Ms. Alutto suggested that any future relationship proposals would naturally come before the full Council and could be referred to an existing standing committee — such as the Community Development Committee — for preparatory work rather than establishing a separate body that might lose momentum over time, as had occurred with the former Friendship City Association. Mayor Amorose Groomes echoed this view, recommending that committee work be routed through an existing committee.

Staff noted that as a next step, Mr. Owens would share Dublin, Ireland City Council's criteria matrix, which staff could compare against the proposed evaluation rubric included in the agenda packet. Council expressed broad support for the rubric framework as a starting point, with the expectation that it would be refined. Mayor Amorose Groomes expressed a desire to move expeditiously, suggesting that the Dublin Irish Festival in the coming year could serve as a meaningful milestone for advancing the relationship, potentially including a visit from the Irish ambassador before the conclusion of her term.

### **Nonprofit Organization Contribution Requests**

Ms. O'Callaghan introduced the second topic, noting that since the City provided one-time funding to nonprofits during the COVID-19 pandemic, staff had experienced an increasing volume of requests for predictable, ongoing funding from nonprofit organizations that fall outside the City's existing grant and partnership structures, such as the Hotel Motel Tax Grant Program. The Finance Committee had been working through the question of whether a formal framework should be

established, and after two committee meetings — in June and November 2025 — the Committee recommended bringing the matter to a full Council work session.

Ms. Weisenauer presented an overview of the current landscape of city payments to nonprofits, which totaled approximately six million dollars and spanned five categories:

- Hotel Motel Tax grants,
- event partnerships such as the Sharing of the Green,
- fees for contractual services such as those paid to Syntero and Ohio Wildlife Center,
- economic development agreements with organizations like JASCO and One Columbus,
- and professional membership fees.

Mr. Rubino clarified that approximately 2.8 million of the total flowed through the Hotel Motel Tax Fund, and the remainder was distributed across the other categories.

Vice Mayor De Rosa raised a definitional concern, noting that characterizing this full sum as nonprofit "contributions" was misleading, as the majority of these payments represent fees for service, economic development agreements, and legally directed expenditures rather than discretionary charitable donations. Ms. O'Callaghan acknowledged that only a portion was discretionary and noted the term was being used in that more limited sense.

Ms. Weisenauer then summarized the benchmarking findings. Westerville allocates 250,000 dollars annually through a community partner fund. Mason caps its program at 50,000 dollars per year with a matching component. Worthington allocates approximately 558,500 dollars annually across a direct Council-designated program, a competitive community grant program, and a neighborhood equity grant initiative.

The proposed program, titled the Resilient Community Grant Program, would offer competitive annual grants to 501(c)(3) organizations located within and primarily serving residents of the City of Dublin, with a focus on basic human service needs. Key features included a competitive evaluation rubric modeled closely on the Hotel Motel Tax grant program, a 25 percent match requirement for organizations receiving funding for three or more consecutive years, biannual education sessions hosted in partnership with the Columbus Metropolitan Library Business and Nonprofit Resource Center, and an annual roundtable with Dublin philanthropic businesses and foundations. Funding amounts — both the total budget line and the individual grant cap — were listed as "to be determined," subject to Council direction and the budget process. Ineligible uses would include arts programming, special events, staffing expenses, travel, organizations with prior budget deficits, endowment funds, and organizations engaged in political or legislative advocacy. Organizations already receiving City grant funding through other programs would also be ineligible.

The evaluation rubric assigned weighted scores across four criteria: quality of life impact (weight of 4), social and cultural resilience (weight of 2), strategic implementation to serve Dublin residents (weight of 2), and fiscal sustainability (weight of 2).

Ms. Krumb offered her opposition, characterizing the proposed program as discretionary philanthropy funded by taxpayer dollars. She expressed concern that selecting recipient organizations necessarily involves subjective judgments that open the City to charges of disparate treatment, potentially including discrimination claims and litigation. She raised enforcement challenges — specifically, how the City would verify that funds were actually spent serving Dublin residents — and noted that the City had already encountered problems with two organizations that received COVID-era funds and from which repayment had been sought. She stated that the City's

existing grant program structures adequately address legitimate partnership and service needs, and that expanding into direct charitable giving is not an appropriate function of city government.

Ms. Johnson agreed with many of these concerns and added that organizations serving Dublin City Schools students necessarily also serve the approximately four percent of Dublin City residents who attend other school districts, complicating residency-based eligibility determinations.

Ms. Alutto, who had been part of the Finance Committee work on the topic, acknowledged that the full Council discussion was exactly the appropriate forum. She raised the additional complication of in-kind donations — such as auction baskets provided to nonprofits — and noted that if Council chose not to establish a grant program, consistency would require revisiting those informal practices as well. She expressed uncertainty about whether a sufficiently clear rubric could be designed for this purpose.

Dr. Lam expressed his support of the program, drawing on his experience writing and evaluating grant applications. He contended that private philanthropic foundations are not adequately filling the gap, that nonprofits providing basic human services are genuinely struggling, and that supporting the basic welfare of residents is a core function of city government. He acknowledged that the rubric needed further refinement — particularly the "social and cultural resilience" criterion, which he found too vague — but maintained that a well-structured program with clearly defined eligibility and criteria could be administered fairly and provide meaningful protection against legal challenges. He cited Worthington's 513,000-dollar program and Westerville's 250,000-dollar program as evidence that similarly sized communities had successfully implemented such frameworks, and referenced local data points such as food insecurity among Dublin City Schools students.

Mr. Keeler was also generally supportive of the concept, noting that the original intent had been focused on a narrow set of well-established Dublin nonprofits with demonstrated community service records, such as the Dublin Food Pantry and the Dublin Historical Society.

Vice Mayor De Rosa and Mayor Amorose Groomes each expressed reservations rooted in fiscal stewardship. Vice Mayor De Rosa emphasized that funding for such a program would need to come from the general fund, requiring trade-offs with core city services such as infrastructure maintenance and public safety. Mayor Amorose Groomes noted that the City is approaching a significant property tax policy conversation, with potential general fund exposure, and that committing to new spending programs ahead of that uncertainty is imprudent. She also drew a distinction between gap-filling that has been approved by voters through levies — as occurs with school funding — and discretionary Council action to redirect general fund dollars toward services that other government entities are already charged with providing. She expressed a preference for applying pressure to those entities — such as county mental health boards and regional food distribution organizations — to fulfill their existing obligations, rather than supplementing them with city funds.

Following the full discussion, Ms. O'Callaghan summarized that a majority of Council did not support establishing a Resilient Community Grant Program at this time, and confirmed that the remaining staff questions — which had been contingent on Council expressing support — did not require further response. Council affirmed the direction, and no further action was taken on this item.

There being no further business for discussion, the meeting was adjourned at 7:40 p.m.



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Presiding Officer – Mayor



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Clerk of Council