


Local

GRADD, Czech Republic delegates renew international partnership

 By Austin Ramsey Messenger-Inquirer

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The Green River Area Development District has renewed its cooperation agreement with the Olomoucky Kraj region of the Czech Republic.

The agreement, originally signed by members of both parties in 2007, establishes a link between the seven-county region in western Kentucky and eastern portions of the central European nation. It is an expansion of a sister city relationship between Olomouc and Owensboro, in place since 1993.

GRADD officials formally welcomed delegates from the sister region during a news conference Monday morning in Owensboro. The team from the Olomouc Region, led by Gov. Jiri Rozboril, is on a week-long visit to western Kentucky, where they are expected to tour government, business, educational and cultural facilities.

The visit comes on the heels of an international economic summit last year that included representatives from both regions, the Kentucky World Trade Center, state and regional economic development practitioners and industry leaders. It came about as a result of several GRADD visits to Olomouc by a delegation led by former Chairman and Owensboro City Manager Bill Parrish.

Parrish, who spoke Monday, drew on comparisons between the two regions. He said there are so many similarities that collaborative efforts like this exist.

"We hope to show you the joys of this region and beyond," he told the delegation. "We are partners, but more than that, we are friends."

Olomoucky Kraj maintains more than eight other partnerships with regions in Europe, but Gov. Rozboril called the relationship with Owensboro and the GRADD region its "most successful and productive," despite distance and language barriers.

Speaking through a translator Monday, Rozboril said last year was a milestone in the almost decade-long agreement with GRADD and Owensboro. The economic summit, he said, should be a starting point for renewed interests in mutually beneficial business ventures. Olomoucky Kraj has officially handed GRADD a list of Olomouc organizations interested in investing in the area and he said he expects a similar list of area business leaders during this visit.

"This is a really beautiful place with great people," he said. "It's a slightly different countryside with slightly different municipalities, but that's exactly why we travel -- to explore differences and find commonalities. These mutual visits have grown into friendships."

Both Rozboril and GRADD Board Chairman Jack McCaslin signed the new agreement Monday to further support and implement the mission of the partnership and cooperation agreement between the two regions. McCaslin said it was an honor to further the partnership and develop ties with European colleagues.

Also joining the Olomouc leaders this week are volunteers who were chosen for their dedication to bettering Czech people. Part of the agreement includes the GRADD/Olomoucky Kraj Area Link (GOAL), which provides opportunities for volunteers in both regions to visit and understand how social services and nonprofit organizations operate on both continents.

One of those volunteers is Jaroslav Strejcek, a Czech businessman and founder of the Little Noah Foundation, which supports orphanages and foster care organizations in his country. Strejcek said two of the biggest challenges for those leaving the organization's care is affordable housing and job opportunities. In addition to now aiding young people in finding jobs, the foundation is financing transitional housing units through a project called "I Grow with My Tree." The foundation plants trees for patrons who donate money. So far, the foundation has planted 291 trees and established gardens in Velký Týnec, Přerov and Olomouc.

Leaders planted the foundation's 292nd tree Monday in Owensboro.

"I'm so happy to plant a tree here in Owensboro," Strejcek said. "It's a reminder of children with social or health disabilities in the Czech Republic and here in the United States."

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Photo by Austin Ramsey Messenger-Inquirer/aramsey@messenger-inquirer.com

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Jaroslav Strejcek, a Czech businessman and founder of the Little Noah Foundation, facetiously hugs a tree at the Green River Area Development District headquarters in Owensboro Monday. Strejcek is part of a 12-person delegation from GRADD's sister region in the Czech Republic. The team of delegates is touring the area as part of that partnership.



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Jiří Rozbořil, governor of the Czech Republic's Olomouc Region, admires a gift he received Monday from the Green River Area Development District in Owensboro.

