

NEAL PEIRCE COLUMN

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SEATTLE'S GLOBAL MAESTRO

By Neal R. Peirce

SEATTLE -- Bill Stafford, head of the Trade Alliance of Greater Seattle, is a bit rumpled, some would say an old shoe type. His eyeglasses are standard issue; his suits lack of the chic cut of an international sophisticate.

But Stafford may be more "onto" to how U.S. citistates must compete in the new global economy than any other living American.

Under a program Stafford leads for the Greater Seattle Chamber of Commerce, four delegations of Seattle regional leaders -- an average of 75 from business, government, non-profits, schools and colleges -- have made week-long reconnaissance trips to successful foreign regions.

In 1992, their target was Amsterdam, Rotterdam and Stuttgart, in 1994 Osaka/Kobe, Japan, in 1996 Hong Kong, and this past May the London and Bristol regions of Great Britain. In 1998, there'll be off to Singapore.

Why go to all this trouble, at a cost (paid by participants) of roughly \$300,000 a trip? Stafford's brief, audacious reply: "We are building the most internationally sophisticated leadership in the world."

The delegations, he notes, become "personally acquainted with our global competitors and customers." They get to know each other better, so they can collaborate better at home. And they showcase Seattle as a globally-attuned citistate.

No other American region is sending such broad-gauged delegations abroad -- though Seattle, arguably, has the most need. With Boeing's multi-billion foreign sales, Microsoft and an active port, the multi-county Puget Sound area is more dependent on foreign trade -- close to one in three jobs -- than any other American region.

Almost every American city of size talks about its global ties. But most rewards will go to the limited number of cities that earn a full "international franchise," argues George Duff, a lead author of Seattle's international policy, former head of the Seattle Chamber

and a 20-year colleague of Bill Stafford.

The international franchise, Duff suggests, means global name familiarity, financial power, major exporters, a leading port and/or airport, and being “user friendly” for foreign business travelers and tourists. Outside of such megacities as New York, Los Angeles and Chicago, U.S. regions must struggle to prove themselves globally significant.

Atlanta was an early striver/winner, culminating in its capture of the 1996 Olympic Games. Seattle is determined to be in the first rank. Bill Stafford likes to tell the story of how the first foreign trip went to the Netherlands “because we figured the Dutch had been trading successfully for 1,000 years, and we could learn from their strategy.”

In Amsterdam, the Seattleites discussed strategy in the same room where the decision had been made, centuries ago, to settle New York. King County Councilman Bruce Lang, in a follow-up session, realized how economic issues permeated Amsterdam decision-making – compared to how little they figured in his own county government.

Seattle’s trips are the antithesis of good-time junkets. Stafford prepares briefing books packed with local history, economic and political facts, issue summaries and press clippings. He travels so often, lining up top figures to meet Seattle’s delegations, that he ran out of pages for country stamps in his passport.

On this spring’s trip to Britain, speakers included the executive director of the Bank of England, the chairmen of Lloyds Insurance, the British Airport Authority and the London Pride Partnership, and the U.S. Ambassador. The Seattleites’ itinerary ranged from Bristol harbor to Whitehall to the Docklands, with briefings at each spot.

The Seattle region’s first-ever strategic economic plan – covering every area from airport capacity to land use, workforce training to economic sustainability – has emerged from the process.

Whatever prepared Bill Stafford, the fellow-next-door type who started his career in the ‘60s cultivating car dealers for Ford, to be maestro of the global trips? Political experience helped: he served three successive Seattle mayors as chief of relations with county, state and federal governments.

For years, those of us in the national press who wrote on local issues found Stafford the most skilled and congenial local government staff person dealing with the media. And before we did, he saw the

central importance of cohesion in metropolitan regions.

Appointed to the Seattle Zoo Board, Stafford moved instinctively to forge international ties. After putting together a “sister city” agreement with Chongqing, China, in the ‘80s, he negotiated with the Chinese for a series of animal exchanges including golden monkeys, red panthers and ostriches.

Everything the Stafford way is done with humor and without presumption. “Bill doesn’t know you’re supposed to be suave, cool, cosmopolitan,” says former Mayor Charles Royer. “He’s just the consummate networker. He’s not manipulative. He has a deep belief in public service. Among contact people, he’s Pavarotti compared to guys who just sing in the shower.”

Indeed, if networking, the Stafford speciality, is critical currency in the high-technology global age, his record proves how vital human contact remains.