

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Reflections on Japan

When Springfield Mayor Bob Markel asked me to represent him at a conference in Japan last month, I couldn't accept immediately. The trip meant spending Thanksgiving feasting on tempura instead of turkey. It meant skipping preparation of Thanksgiving dinner for the year. But the promise of exotic adventure finally prevailed over family tradition and, with the blessing of my family, I departed for the Asia-Pacific Sister Cities Exchange Conference in Tokyo.

Here is a brief report on that trip.

The conference is held annually as a cultural exchange activity of the Japanese government. This was the first year the United States and Canada were recognized as part of the Asia Pacific region. Springfield and Takikawa, Hokkaido were one of only 16 participating pairs of sister cities. The trip had two phases: a plenary session in Tokyo and a side trip to our sister city. Sue Root, executive director of the World Affairs Council, shared the trip with me. Manila, Katmandu and Bangkok as well as Australian and Sri Lanka cities were among the participants.

Although the Japanese government saw this as cultural exchange, both Sue and I are also interested in economic exchange, and we used the trip to explore economic opportunities. I also became somewhat of a local celebrity as a female politician. Japanese women have been able to vote since 1946, but they are still a small minority of officeholders and policy makers.

In Tokyo, each city made a presentation about a local problem. We used the new Pioneer Valley Plan for Progress to show how Springfield is dealing with a recession. Many of the cities spoke of the difficulty of serving the needs of aging population previously cared for by their families. I came away from the session with the sense that the United States is ahead of much of the world in providing for our elderly citizens.

If Sue and I were players in the Tokyo meeting, we were the main attraction in Takikawa. Welcomed with the pomp and circumstance of visiting dignitaries, we then became featured speakers at a regional seminar. Nearly 200 businessmen and students attended the afternoon meeting, listening to my presentation, "Massachusetts and the Challenge to Compete in the World Marketplace." Simultaneous translation was provided with individual earpieces. After my talk, I answered some tough questions about trade policy, realizing with some uneasiness that my responses conveyed the weight of the United States government. The seminar was held on Thanksgiving Day and – yes– we did have tempura for dinner.

I stated that businessmen made up the audience instead of using the American term "businesspersons." That is because Japan is still primarily a man's world. We Americans were treated with respect, but we were an unusual delegation. Sue and I were invited to meet with a group of women employees of the city and answer their questions about American women in the workplace. I gave the women campaign buttons from my election, and noticed that my "Mary's the 1" slogan was displayed on their jackets the next day. I wonder if it will become a secret symbol for Japanese women's liberation.

I undertook the trip as an economic endeavor and came away with a cultural lesson. Understanding the customs required assistance from Sue my more experienced companion. Understanding the culture required the counsel of our Australian translator. Now I know just enough to try again, but only after my internal clock returns to Eastern Standard Time.