



California's Global Cities

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Summary

California is a major player on the world stage thanks to its global economy, powerful and varied business sector, and political leaders who are well aware of the state's global positionality.¹ But California is not a single-dimensional actor: its global status comes not only from the state level but from its many cities, too. With the fifth-largest economy in the world, California has the highest urbanized share of total population of any U.S. state.² Its large and midsize cities—diverse, well-resourced, and with various strong business sectors—are increasingly focused on becoming global actors in their own right.³

This paper, the first in a two-part series, analyzes nine cities in California: Anaheim, Fresno, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Oakland, Sacramento, San Diego, San Francisco, and San José. It examines these cities' global components and engagements. The term “global components” refers to the globally engaged institutions and networks that operate in the cities, and “global engagements” consists of the official local activities that are international in nature. The second paper in this series will focus on city-led trade missions abroad. Together, these papers thus illuminate how California cities are engaging in their own forms of diplomacy and the goals they seek to advance by doing so.

This first paper finds that:

- The majority of California city governments examined in this paper engage in subnational diplomacy. In seven of nine cities, there is at least one official with international relations work designated as one of their core responsibilities. This ranges from a deputy mayor with a large staff to small offices that report directly to the mayor, government affairs managers, or privately contracted firms. Mayors in seven of nine cities led delegations abroad in 2023 and early 2024.

- City governments have increased their international relations work over the past decade. In 2024, seven of nine city governments engaged in this work through a city-level international affairs office or representative. In 2010, only three of the nine cities had done this work.
- The presence of international institutions and resources in a city does not necessarily predict that city will engage in global affairs; in some cases, city leaders showed great initiative despite relatively limited global components.
- Outside of city halls, infrastructure hubs are engines of subnational diplomacy. International airports and container ports are well-connected business associations with an intrinsic desire to seek new global partners, and they receive flexible funding to do so.
- Cities usually do not publicize their international efforts. Locally led international affairs may not seem immediately relevant in the eyes of local voters, so cities often engage in this work quietly.

Introduction

Each large and mid-sized city in California hosts various institutions that are either global in their own right or serve as nodes within transnational networks of business, diplomacy, and culture. Ports, foreign businesses that employ California residents, local businesses that export products abroad, sister city chapters, consulates, sports teams, universities with foreign students, both permanent diaspora and more transient migrant communities, and a host of other actors make up this web of transnational connections that exist in California's cities.

In one of the notable diplomatic developments of the past decade, city governments in every region of the world have dedicated more resources to learning from and engaging with other cities, business sectors, and multilateral institutions.⁴ Subnational and more specifically city diplomacy is becoming increasingly formal across the world, and this often takes place via established “city networks” that facilitate networking, policy development, advocacy, and other types of collaboration across cities such as C40 Cities, the Urban 20, and Metropolis.⁵ Through locally led international relations, city governments seek tourism revenue, expanded export markets, foreign investment, and employment opportunities. They also pursue policy solutions and nurture lasting cultural and economic partnerships with cities abroad.

In line with global trends, cities in California are harnessing global interests and networks to better serve their constituents and, in so doing, are pursuing more of their own diplomatic engagement. This paper demonstrates that city government-led diplomatic engagement has increased over the past decade. In 2023, seven of the nine cities examined in this paper engaged in international relations work through a designated office. In 2010, only three of the cities had such an office.

However, while strategic diplomacy at the local level is growing, it is not a top priority for residents. In the first-ever Carnegie California Global Affairs Survey of 2023, Californians expressed support for local engagement on global issues, such as climate change, but expressed wariness over city officials engaging with foreign leaders themselves.⁶ Still, California's cities host and influence a unique interplay of local and global interests and have become active players in international affairs and diplomacy.

This paper first analyzes global actors and institutions at the city level. It then examines how California cities are engaging, formally and structurally, in their own diplomatic activities. Using an original methodology called the Global City Index, this analysis considers variables that encompass “global components” and “global engagements” at the local level.⁷ The phrase “global components” refers to the globally engaged institutions and networks that operate in cities, and “global engagements” consist of the official local activities that are international in nature. This methodology was complemented by interviews with local leaders (see list of interviewees in the notes section).

The first section of this paper describes the global components active in nine cities in California. The second outlines these cities' global engagements, describing their offices of international affairs, evaluating local leaders' global priorities and policy portfolios, and illuminating how work in the international realm has expanded in several cities.

Components of a Global City: Analyzing Nine Cities in California

Each city researched for this paper hosts various institutions that are either global in their own right or serve as nodes within global networks of business, diplomacy, and culture. These institutions make up the various components of a “global” city.

Generally speaking, the larger a city's population, gross domestic product (GDP), and spending power through its municipal budget, the more globally relevant the city is likely to be. The authority a city has over its jurisdiction influences its ability to raise revenues, pursue its strategies, and, subsequently, develop and execute a portfolio of global engagement. International airports, container ports, universities with foreign students, billion-dollar sports teams, consulates, international organizations, global business communities, tourism associations, high-speed internet connectivity, and foreign-born populations all boost a city's need and capacity to engage outside its local domain.

The variables in the left column of the key represent the various ways in which California cities’ local institutions facilitate international engagement, including through the networks in which they operate. The following sections evaluate the variables in this figure for nine cities in California. The accompanying figures illustrate the extent to which each component or variable is present in each city.⁸

Global City Index

COMPONENTS	SCALE	ENGAGEMENTS
City Size and Resources	5 HIGHLY DEVELOPED	Municipal Office of International Affairs
Consolidated Political Geography		City Networks and Sister Cities
International Airport		Tourism Association
Container Port		City-Led Missions Abroad
Global Universities		Hosting Foreign Leaders
Major Sports	3	Government Resolutions and Statements
Diplomatic Links		Office of Immigrant or Refugee Affairs
United Nations and International Non-Governmental Organization Links		
International Business Links	2	
Global Recognition and Brand	1 NASCENT OR DEVELOPING	
Resident Connectivity		
Foreign-Born Population		

The Big Global Three: Los Angeles, San Francisco, and San Diego

Los Angeles

Los Angeles has many components of a global city: an international business sector, a large international airport, global universities and sports teams, and a huge population of foreign-born residents.

Los Angeles

	RANKING
City Size and Resources	5
Consolidated Political Geography	3
International Airport	5
Container Port	5
Global Universities	5
Major Sports	5
Diplomatic Links	4
United Nations and International Non-Governmental Organization Links	3
International Business Links	5
Global Recognition and Brand	5
Resident Connectivity	4
Foreign-Born Population	5

With 4 million residents, Los Angeles is the second-most populous city in the United States. Los Angeles County, which includes cities such as West Hollywood, Santa Monica, Long Beach, and Malibu, is far more populous with around 12 million residents. Los Angeles has one of the largest municipal budgets in the United States, at about \$13 billion, and the county’s budget is much larger.⁹

Los Angeles has global infrastructure, including Los Angeles International Airport (LAX). The airport sees the most direct international flights—seventy-five—of any California airport and has among the highest international air passenger traffic in the United States, with 4 million people leaving or arriving on international flights per year.¹⁰ Los Angeles is

also home to global universities such as the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and the University of Southern California (USC). Both are globally recognized schools with high foreign student enrollment.¹¹

Other components are relevant in an analysis of the ways in which Los Angeles is global. For one, Los Angeles is a global brand. The Anholt-Ipsos City Brands Index, a preeminent index generated by one of the world's largest market research companies, measures a number of factors that influence global perceptions of cities and subsequently affect the flow of business, cultural, and tourism activities. In 2022, Anholt-Ipsos ranked Los Angeles as a tier-two "City Brand" behind cities such as London, New York, Paris, and Sydney but on par with Toronto and Washington, D.C.¹² The city's sports teams—the Lakers (basketball), the Angels and the Dodgers (baseball), the Chargers and the Rams (football), the Galaxy and Angel City FC (soccer), among others—are global brands in their own right. Los Angeles tourism statistics far outpace other California cities, with an estimated \$3 billion in annual revenue and \$35 billion in tourism-related spending.¹³

Los Angeles houses sixteen global headquarters among the world's 2,000 largest public corporations, compared to San Francisco's seventeen and New York City's eighty-two.¹⁴ In her book *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*, Saskia Sassen argues that such cities are "command centers" for the global economy as multinational corporations providing business, legal, and accounting services in cities around the world are central nodes in an increasingly interdependent global economy.¹⁵ The Port of Los Angeles, in conjunction with the Port of Long Beach, is a global player by itself: 37 percent of U.S. imports and 22 percent of exports flow through these two ports.¹⁶

The final components of the Global City Index round out the illustration of Los Angeles as a global city in many respects. Los Angeles boasts impressive diplomatic links for a non-capital city, with nearly 100 consulates.¹⁷ In addition, 40 percent of the city's population is foreign-born, higher than all but four cities in the United States. In fact, Los Angeles' foreign-born population of over 1.5 million residents would amount to the second-largest city in California, behind Log Angeles itself.¹⁸

Finally, most residents of Los Angeles have access to fast internet, which connects them to the rest of the world. As Klaus Segbers argues in *Cities and Global Governance: New Sites for International Relations*, cities represent the physical crossroads of globalization, including how people engage with and digest information. "Global City Regions," as he names them, are important not just economically but also for their technological capabilities and the reach of the institutions and residents within them.¹⁹ About 90 percent of Los Angeles residents have broadband internet subscriptions.

San Francisco

San Francisco has many components of a global city: a very large business community relative to its population, a high volume international airport, major sports teams, consulates, and diaspora communities.

San Francisco

	RANKING
City Size and Resources	4
Consolidated Political Geography	5
International Airport	5
Container Port	5
Global Universities	2
Major Sports	4
Diplomatic Links	3
United Nations and International Non-Governmental Organization Links	2
International Business Links	5
Global Recognition and Brand	5
Resident Connectivity	4
Foreign-Born Population	4

San Francisco has a population of approximately 800,000 residents.²⁰ It is also the only dual city-county in California, consolidating its political system, revenue-raising ability, and logistical capacities into one government authority. For a city with fewer than 1 million inhabitants, it has a sizable budget of \$12 billion, nearing that of Los Angeles. San Francisco’s airport ranks fourth in the United States in international passengers per year and has over fifty direct international flights.²¹

San Francisco, like many cities in California, is rich in both higher education institutions and sports teams. The city has one global university, the University of California, San Francisco, which has an endowment of \$4 billion and 10.5 percent foreign student enrollment.²² Stanford University and the University of California, Berkeley, are also close by. San Francisco is home to sports teams with global fanbases including the San Francisco 49ers (football), the Golden State Warriors (basketball), and the San Francisco Giants (baseball).

San Francisco has 50 percent fewer consulates and foreign representations than Los Angeles, but it houses a regional office of the U.S. State Department’s Office of Foreign Missions.²³

Nongovernmental organization and UN links are generally not a factor at the local level, though the United Nations Plaza serves as a unique historical landmark in the heart of the civic center plaza commemorating the signing of the UN Charter.²⁴

The city is also home to a strong, global business community. It hosts at least seventeen global headquarters of the world’s 2,000 largest public corporations, and those same corporations enjoy the highest revenue and market value of any city in California.²⁵ The San Francisco–Oakland metropolitan area produces \$700 billion in total GDP, the fourth highest for any metropolitan area in the country.²⁶

According to the Anholt-Ipsos City Brands Index, it was a top ten “city brand” in 2022, meaning it is a highly recognized city with a strong global reputation.²⁷ About 86 percent of its residents have access to at-home internet subscriptions.²⁸ Finally, 34 percent of the city is foreign-born. For reference, 15 percent of the U.S. population is foreign-born, and 27 percent of California residents are foreign-born.²⁹

San Diego

San Diego’s global connections are similar to those of Los Angeles and San Francisco. Minutes from the U.S. border with Mexico, the city has a large foreign-born population, a large international airport, and a local government empowered to pursue opportunities beyond its jurisdiction.

San Diego

	RANKING
City Size and Resources	4
Consolidated Political Geography	4
International Airport	4
Container Port	5
Global Universities	3
Major Sports	3
Diplomatic Links	3
United Nations and International Non-Governmental Organization Links	1
International Business Links	3
Global Recognition and Brand	4
Resident Connectivity	5
Foreign-Born Population	4

San Diego has nearly 1.5 million residents. Its budget for 2023 was about \$5 billion.³⁰ The City of San Diego is the political and economic center of San Diego County, which operates on a budget closer to \$10 billion and encompasses several other cities including Carlsbad and Chula Vista.³¹

San Diego houses a number of global hubs and institutions. It has an international airport with direct flights to major hubs in Europe and Asia.³² Its global universities—San Diego State University (SDSU) and University of California, San Diego (UCSD)—each have endowments of over \$1 billion, though only UCSD maintains a relatively high number of international students, totaling 20 percent of the student body.³³ San Diego has one major professional sports team, the Padres baseball team (with \$1.75 billion estimated value), after the Chargers moved to Los Angeles in 2017.³⁴ San Diego has twenty consulates and foreign representations, and many of its historic connections are with its immediate neighbor, Mexico.³⁵

San Diego's business community and tourism industry links the city and its residents to networks, resources, and affairs around the world. The San Diego–Carlsbad metropolitan area produces nearly \$300 billion in GDP each year, ranking it behind sixteen other U.S. metropolitan areas. The city's tourism industry is one of California's largest, with \$14 billion of travel-related spending and over \$1 billion of tax revenue reported each year.³⁶ These numbers are relatively high, indicating that San Diego is a destination for travelers around the world. In addition, 90 percent of San Diego residents have at-home broadband internet subscriptions, allowing them to connect to the world. Finally, San Diego has a foreign-born population of 27 percent.³⁷

The Six Other Cities: Anaheim, Fresno, Long Beach, Oakland, Sacramento, and San José

Anaheim, Fresno, Long Beach, Oakland, Sacramento, and, to a lesser degree, San José may not immediately stand out as global cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco, and San Diego. However, according to the Global City Index, it is clear that cities throughout California have many global components, including international airports, major sports teams, strong business sectors, fast-paced internet connections that connect residents with the world, and a high percentage of foreign-born residents. An analysis of each city's global components brings into relief a couple key points about connectivity between California cities and the world.

Late twentieth century and early twenty-first century globalization, for all its challenges and faults, has made California's cities increasingly global. Over the past twenty years,

Six More California Cities Anaheim, Fresno, Long Beach, Oakland, Sacramento, San José

	Anaheim	Fresno	Long Beach	Oakland	Sacramento	San José
City Size and Resources	3	3	3	3	3	4
Consolidated Political Geography	2	4	1	4	2	3
International Airport	2	3	2	4	4	4
Container Port	1	1	5	5	3	1
Global Universities	2	1	2	1	3	2
Major Sports	2	1	1	3	3	3
Diplomatic Links	2	2	2	2	2	2
United Nations and International Non-Governmental Organization Links	1	1	1	1	1	1
International Business Links	4	2	5	5	2	3
Global Recognition and Brand	3	2	1	2	2	3
Resident Connectivity	4	3	4	3	4	5
Foreign-Born Population	4	2	3	4	3	5

international flights have increased across the state and country, California schools have enrolled more international students, and the proliferation of city networks, both for policy and advocacy, has made cities and their constituents more interconnected globally.³⁸ The six additional cities examined in this paper demonstrate these components.

Varied and Strong Economies

California's powerful economy is made up of many mid-sized cities. Some are international hubs in their own right. Many mid-sized cities are home to one primary business sector that is large enough to have a significant export market and thus engage in active international relations strategies. This includes agriculture in Fresno, technology services in San José, sports brands in Anaheim, lobbying and private-sector actors in the capital city of Sacramento, and container ports and their associated businesses in Oakland and Long Beach.

Natural Binational Connections

California is a coastal state with strong local connections to Asia-Pacific countries, Canada, and Mexico. These connections are significant for economic, political, and cultural reasons. For local governments, they open up myriad opportunities to connect and do business with other countries. The most obvious examples include the Northern Californian tech sector's historic relationship—both cultural and economic—with China and Taiwan and San Diego's close partnership with Tijuana, Mexico.³⁹

International Ports and Airports

For California cities, control over ports is a lever of regional power and international partnership. Cities such as Long Beach, Los Angeles, Oakland, San Diego, and San Francisco have at least one port that are world-class business associations and economic engines for the cities. Nearly every large and mid-sized city throughout the state is near an international airport.

Container ports and airports are highly internationally oriented, intrinsically focused on international trade and commerce. They are often self-funding city departments, a fact that has important implications for cities hoping to embark on international trade missions. Oakland, for example, went on a trade mission to Vietnam in 2023 that was led by the mayor and organized and financed by the Port of Oakland and its private-sector partners.

Ports are critical infrastructure for opening economies to global investment, but they are also sites of geopolitical competition between the United States and China.⁴⁰ While national-level tensions trickle into city-to-city relations, cities such as Long Beach and Los Angeles have leveraged their port power to engage in diplomacy with China through addressing global challenges such as climate change. In 2023, in a process facilitated by C40 Cities, Los Angeles, Long Beach, and Shanghai developed the first-ever trans-Pacific green shipping corridor.⁴¹

Diversity

As previously mentioned, 15 percent of the U.S. population is foreign-born. In comparison, California cities consistently have foreign-born population rates of 30–40 percent.⁴² People from across Africa, Central and Eastern Europe, Latin America, and South and East Asia have made homes across the state. People with Mexican ancestry make up well over 50 percent of Fresno's population; as a result, the city's decision to recognize Guadalajara, Mexico, as a new sister city in 2023 was well received.⁴³ In San José, nearly 40 percent of residents

are foreign-born, a number on par with Miami, New York, and Los Angeles and among the highest in the United States.⁴⁴ Because of their inherent interest in and connections to other countries, these communities naturally gear the politics of California's cities toward world affairs.

Sister Cities and Cultural Connections

Sister cities are long-term partnership agreements between two cities for cultural and economic development and are overseen by local chapters of Sister Cities International. Anaheim has a formal Anaheim Sister City Commission, appointed by the City Council, but most cities' sister city organizations are private.⁴⁵ These connections are often an accessible entryway into international affairs work. Fresno engaged in trade missions abroad in 2023, visiting one of its sister cities: Münster, Germany, and forging a new sister city connection in Guadalajara, Mexico.⁴⁶ Despite having no formal office entirely dedicated to organizing global engagements, the city worked with its sister city organizers to plan and execute these trips.⁴⁷ Each city researched for this paper has active sister city connections.

Global Schools and Sports Teams

California has by far the most sports teams of any U.S. state, and eight of its teams landed on *Forbes'* 2023 list of the fifty most-valuable sports teams in the world.⁴⁸

Similarly, California's higher education system is globally recognized as the top destination in the United States for international students.⁴⁹ California schools have in some instances helped merge the global interests of the private and public sectors. A prime example was seen in San Diego, where UCSD's business center helped resuscitate the World Trade Center San Diego by proposing to move it from the auspices of the San Diego Airport to the San Diego Regional Economic Development Council.⁵⁰

Sports and schools are just two global components cities can use to their advantage as part of their overarching diplomacy efforts. City leaders leverage many of the components that make a city global to develop relationships across the globe. Sports teams, influential business sectors, and renowned universities contribute to a city's brand and help it promote itself on the world stage.

Engagements of a Global City

How Do Cities in California Practice Diplomacy?

Despite possessing similar component pieces for global engagement, California cities are decidedly unique in how they conduct diplomacy. This section examines each of the variables of global engagement according to the Global City Index. The right column in the key shows the various engagements that a global city might participate in, according to the index. This section also examines how each city organizes its global engagements through a public office and whether and how this work has evolved over time.

Global City Index

COMPONENTS	SCALE	ENGAGEMENTS
City Size and Resources	HIGHLY DEVELOPED	Municipal Office of International Affairs
Consolidated Political Geography		City Networks and Sister Cities
International Airport	5	Tourism Association
Container Port		City-Led Missions Abroad
Global Universities		Hosting Foreign Leaders
Major Sports		Government Resolutions and Statements
Diplomatic Links		Office of Immigrant or Refugee Affairs
United Nations and International Non-Governmental Organization Links	4	
International Business Links		
Global Recognition and Brand		
Resident Connectivity	3	
Foreign-Born Population		
	2	
	1	
	NASCENT OR DEVELOPING	

Los Angeles: A Large, High-Powered Office with Big Plans

The City of Los Angeles participates in a number of global engagements, according to the Global City Index. Los Angeles engages in public diplomacy and international relations principally through the Mayor’s Office of International Affairs. The city is a member of various city networks, including C40 Cities, the Strong Cities Network, and the Urban20, or U20.⁵¹ Los Angeles has twenty-five sister cities including Mexico City, Mexico; Guangzhou, China; Jakarta, Indonesia; St. Petersburg, Russia; Tehran, Iran; and Vancouver, Canada.⁵² Los Angeles City Tourism Department (CTD) is a public agency that contracts with LA Tourism and Convention Bureau, a nonprofit, to lead destination marketing efforts. LA Tourism not only leads missions but also has permanent offices in cities around the world.⁵³ Every year, CTD staff travel to meet with tourism and hospitality stakeholders in countries around the world in engagements called “sales missions.”⁵⁴ Los Angeles World Airports (LAWA), which owns and manages LAX, is a self-supported department of the city, governed by an appointed seven-member Board of Airport Commissioners.⁵⁵

Los Angeles

	RANKING
Municipal Office of International Affairs	5
City Networks and Sister Cities	5
Tourism Association	5
City-Led Missions Abroad	5
Hosting Foreign Leaders	5
Government Resolutions and Statements	5
Office of Immigrant or Refugee Affairs	5

Los Angeles also organizes its own city-led trade missions abroad, and former mayor Eric Garcetti traveled frequently to other countries, including Germany, Indonesia, Japan, Mexico, South Korea, and Switzerland.⁵⁶ Beyond trade missions, the purpose of these trips included efforts to win the Olympic and Paralympic Games for LA and to represent the city at international conferences like COP26 and the U20 and C40 summits. In March 2024, Mayor Karen Bass traveled to Paris to meet with city officials planning for the 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games and learn lessons in anticipation of Los Angeles’ games in 2028.⁵⁷ Bass has focused on personally meeting with Los Angeles’ Consular Corps, as well as

making public statements on foreign events, including her comments in support of Armenia following the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023.⁵⁸ Los Angeles also has a Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs, which supports immigrant communities in the city.

Deputy Mayor of International Affairs

International affairs in Los Angeles are conducted primarily through the Mayor's Office of International Affairs, established in 2017.⁵⁹ Prior to 2017, Los Angeles had staff responsible for international delegations and protocol and a small international trade team within the Mayor's Office of Economic Development. During an earlier administration, in 2006, mayor Antonio Villaraigosa established an Office of Trade and Development.⁶⁰ The deputy mayor of international affairs originally had a team of about eight staff and as of early 2024 has a team of more than ten, including a staff member seconded from the Tokyo Metropolitan Government.

The Mayor's Office of International Affairs oversees three primary portfolios: international relations, international trade and investment, and international events. The office maintains active relationships with the city's nearly 100 consulates and honorable representatives as well as with its international business community. It is also focused on bringing new actors into the diplomatic and business community—particularly from Africa—as well as creating new direct international flights. The office serves as the liaison for coordinating with the respective host committees for the 2026 FIFA World Cup and 2028 Olympic and Paralympic Games.⁶¹

San Francisco: A Small but Powerful Office Directed by a Seasoned Official

San Francisco accomplishes high levels of engagement through its Office of Economic and Workforce Development (OEWD), which includes the Office of the Director of International Trade and Commerce. San Francisco is a member of some global city networks, including C40, ICLEI, and the Resilient Cities Network.⁶² It has a sister city organization, connecting it regularly with cities like Haifa, Israel; Sydney, Australia; Seoul, South Korea; Shanghai, China; and Manila, Philippines.⁶³

Mayor London Breed traveled extensively in 2023, including to Paris, London, Frankfurt, Brussels, and Haifa.⁶⁴ In April 2024, Breed traveled to China on a weeklong trip centered on economic development and tourism promotion with representatives of the San Francisco International Airport. The mayor visited Beijing, Guangzhou, Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Shenzhen.⁶⁵ San Francisco has also hosted high-profile foreign guests and international convenings, including Queen Máxima of the Netherlands in 2022, Chinese President Xi

San Francisco

	RANKING
Municipal Office of International Affairs	4
City Networks and Sister Cities	5
Tourism Association	5
City-Led Missions Abroad	5
Hosting Foreign Leaders	5
Government Resolutions and Statements	3
Office of Immigrant or Refugee Affairs	5

Jinping for his meeting with U.S. President Joe Biden in 2023, and the 2023 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leaders’ Meeting.⁶⁶ Bay Area Council President and CEO Jim Wunderman applauded Breed for securing the APEC Summit for San Francisco, and Xi Jinping extended an invitation for her to bring a local delegation to China.⁶⁷

In January 2024, San Francisco’s Board of Supervisors voted in favor of a resolution calling for a ceasefire in the Israel-Hamas war. The vote was met with pushback from the mayor because of the city’s sister city relationship with Haifa.⁶⁸ San Francisco also has an office dedicated to civic engagement and immigrant affairs.⁶⁹

Director of International Trade and Commerce within the Office of Economic and Workforce Development

Operating out of the OEWD is a director of international trade and commerce. The director has one staff associate, and their office operates separately from the rest of OEWD, inside San Francisco’s City Hall. The OEWD’s international work has been directed out of the International Trade and Commerce office for decades; the office itself was established over thirty-five years ago under the administration of then mayor Dianne Feinstein.⁷⁰

The Office of the Director of International Trade and Commerce is the San Francisco government’s go-to office for a variety of international relations work. Having held this position for several decades, the current director maintains an extensive network that the office can call upon for guidance on global affairs, to secure federal funding for international travel, and to engage the business community ahead of city-led missions abroad.

The director and staff associate work closely with an international liaison at the San Francisco Airport, as well as the protocol manager in City Hall. This team of four organizes international mayoral trips and the hosting of delegations in the city. The San Francisco Airport is a self-funding city department able to support fundraising for and organizing mayoral trips and full delegation trade missions. The San Francisco airport is a donor to the official 501(c)(6) SF Travel Association, which organizes the city’s corporate tourism and convention stakeholders. Utilizing its power over and relationships with the airport and tourism association, the office is able to find public funds for and organize international trips with both private-sector actors and city leadership.

San Diego: A New Office, an Ambitious Mayor, and a Strong Supporting Cast

San Diego’s official structure for international relations is the Office of Global Affairs, situated within the city’s Office of Government Affairs.⁷¹ San Diego is a member of the city network ICLEI, but not C40, and is a member of Cities of Service and the U.S. Conference of Mayors. Its sister cities include Panama City, Panama; Tijuana and León, Mexico; Warsaw, Poland; Perth, Australia; Havana, Cuba; and Sha’ar Hanegev, Israel, where San Diego Mayor Todd Gloria visited in March 2023 with the U.S. Conference of Mayors and became friends with former mayor, Ofir Liebstein, who was killed by Hamas fighters on October 7, 2023.⁷² San Diego has an active but private tourism association that organized sales missions to Australia, Canada, China, Mexico, and Japan in 2023.⁷³ The Global Affairs Office and the San Diego Regional Economic Development Corporation (SD EDC) have been highly active in organizing trade missions together, including to the Netherlands in 2022 and South Korea in 2023.⁷⁴

San Diego

	RANKING
Municipal Office of International Affairs	5
City Networks and Sister Cities	4
Tourism Association	4
City-Led Missions Abroad	5
Hosting Foreign Leaders	3
Government Resolutions and Statements	3
Office of Immigrant or Refugee Affairs	5

Gloria has made a point to engage with domestic leaders as well. He was among the first to welcome Biden on the tarmac when he arrived in San Diego for high-profile Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (AUKUS) negotiations in early 2023.⁷⁵

Gloria's administration works closely with the government of Tijuana on a number of issues, including the 2024 World Design exhibitions in both cities.⁷⁶ While the San Diego City Council appears to have avoided any formal resolutions or high-profile speeches on foreign affairs, the mayor is active on social media, discussing his trips abroad and sharing his thoughts on meetings with foreign leaders.⁷⁷ Finally, San Diego established the Office of Immigrant Affairs in 2022.⁷⁸

San Diego Office of Global Affairs

Gloria established the first-ever Office of Global Affairs for the City of San Diego in 2020. This office has a staff of two: the director and a protocol manager. Their chief mandate has been to build a network of the city's organizations already operating in international affairs and direct and increase the city's active, formal, international engagement.⁷⁹

In 2022 and 2023, Gloria and his staff traveled to the Netherlands and South Korea on trade missions to develop economic ties and bring investment to the San Diego region. To accomplish this, the city's new global affairs team worked with established institutions including the International Affairs Board (IAB) of San Diego, an official advisory body for the mayor and City Council, and the World Trade Center (WTC) San Diego, under the custodianship of the SD EDC. The IAB helps bring together diverse actors in the city to support official international engagements, while the WTC organizes and brings private-sector partners on trade missions abroad. In 2023, Gloria and San Diego County Chair Nora Vargas traveled to Mexico with the San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce, which hosts an annual trip to Mexico City. The chamber is another institution with deep relationships in Mexico, including with regional chambers of commerce.

The Office of Global Affairs has been strategic in its approach to maximize trade missions for San Diego. This is evident in its partnership with the government of Tijuana. The two cities developed a communications strategy for the "San Diego Binational Mega Region" to persuade foreign businesses to bring both their manufacturing to Mexico—where Tijuana's medical manufacturing field employs skilled workers—and their final products, headquarters, and distribution to San Diego, where medical devices and healthcare-related services find a thriving marketplace.⁸⁰

The city hosted its first-ever annual forum of the International Affairs Board in 2023, with the SD EDC, WTC, San Diego State University, San Diego Sister Cities, San Diego Diplomacy Council, local consulate representatives, and a number of other participants in attendance.

Global Engagements Across California

	Municipal Office of International Affairs
Los Angeles	Mayor's Office of International Affairs
San Francisco	Director of International Trade and Commerce
San Diego	Office of Global Affairs
Anaheim	None
Fresno	Government Affairs Manager
Long Beach	None
Oakland	Director of International Trade and Transportation
Sacramento	Sacramento China Trade Office
San José	Manager of International Programs

Sacramento: A Uniquely Private Configuration

Sacramento's office for international relations is called the Sacramento China Trade Office, formerly known as the City of Sacramento Trade and Education Office. It is publicly funded and, since its founding, has been operated by a private contractor.⁸¹

Sacramento

	RANKING
Municipal Office of International Affairs	3
City Networks and Sister Cities	3
Tourism Association	3
City-Led Missions Abroad	4
Hosting Foreign Leaders	1
Government Resolutions and Statements	2
Office of Immigrant or Refugee Affairs	1

In 2013, then California governor Jerry Brown created the China Trade and Investment Network (CTIN), overseen primarily by California’s Office of Economic and Business Development (by this time renamed from the California Trade and Commerce Agency to the colloquially known “GO-Biz”).⁸² That same year, officials created the Sacramento China Trade Office (SCTO), an original member of the CTIN with a mandate to pursue deeper economic relationships with Chinese industry for the improvement of Sacramento and California residents’ lives.⁸³ This mandate has only expanded over time.⁸⁴

Sacramento set up its flagship office in Chongqing, China, a city of more than 30 million inhabitants. It has since expanded operations and developed an extensive network of business connections throughout China. Sacramento contracted out the management and strategic development of this operation to a private consulting group with extensive experience working with Chinese business communities. The SCTO has organized up to four trade missions per year since 2013. Among the successful trips abroad was the first direct shipment of California dried cherries to southwest China, delivered directly to Chongqing’s inland container port.⁸⁵

While the City of Sacramento does not engage in a portfolio of international affairs separate from its China Trade Office, it did add a sister city, Sumy, Ukraine, in 2023. The Sacramento City Council unanimously approved of the partnership, and Mayor Darrell Steinberg vowed to use the partnership to shed light on continued struggles stemming from Russia’s war against Ukraine and bring humanitarian aid assistance to Ukraine.⁸⁶

Fresno: A Confluence of Interests Within and Outside Government

The City of Fresno is the heart of the United States’ top county for agricultural production. It has an international airport with flights to Mexico and a research university in California State University, Fresno. According to the Global City Index, it does not otherwise boast significant global components.⁸⁷

Fresno

	RANKING
Municipal Office of International Affairs	3
City Networks and Sister Cities	3
Tourism Association	3
City-Led Missions Abroad	5
Hosting Foreign Leaders	5
Government Resolutions and Statements	4
Office of Immigrant or Refugee Affairs	3

In 2022, a delegation led by Mayor Jerry Dyer visited Guadalajara, Mexico, to meet its new mayor and sign a sister city agreement. The agreement focused on economic development opportunities, tourism, trade coordination, and policy sharing. It marked the first official international trip by a Fresno mayor since the late 1980s and early 1990s when then mayor Karen Humphrey traveled to Dzhambul (formerly of the USSR, and now known as Taraz, Kazakhstan), Japan, and Germany.⁸⁸

From 2021 to 2024, Dyer and a motivated team of City Council members and staff organized or attended several additional high-profile global engagements.⁸⁹ In September 2022, Dyer and a local delegation from Fresno traveled to Vienna, Austria, for a weeklong trip organized by the Global Policy Leadership Academy focused on housing policy and Vienna’s “social housing model.”⁹⁰ Following that trip, Fresno hosted the mayor of its sister city Châteauroux, France, in April 2023. It also hosted the mayor of Münster, Germany, another sister city, and then embarked on a trade mission to Münster in August 2023.⁹¹ In October 2023, Fresno hosted the Fresno International Transportation Innovation Summit, with Münster sending a government minister and a deputy mayor in support.⁹²

In 2024, Fresno continued its extensive global engagements. In May, Dyer led a delegation of city council members and mayoral staff to Tokyo, Japan, on a “fact-finding” mission centered around downtown revitalization and high-speed rail. The mayor met with former Chicago mayor and current U.S. Ambassador to Japan Rahm Emanuel.⁹³

Fresno’s executive branch employs a government affairs manager who coordinates some of the city’s global engagements, including the sister cities program. Without a dedicated office for global affairs, however, each trip is planned differently. Sister city trips are typically organized by the government affairs office and Fresno Sister Cities, a private organization. Dyer’s trip to Vienna—not a sister city—was organized by the Global Policy Leadership Academy, and his trip to Tokyo—also not a sister city—was organized primarily by City Council members themselves, who were inspired to learn more about Tokyo’s high-speed rail ahead of Fresno’s plans to build a high-speed rail itself.⁹⁴

Apart from its varied trips abroad, Fresno’s mayor and City Council engage in global affairs through public debate. In 2023, the council voted to ban caste discrimination and debated whether to fly Palestinian and Israeli flags on public property.⁹⁵ Overall, city diplomacy is a growing enterprise in Fresno.

Oakland: The Port Leads the Way

The Port of Oakland encompasses Oakland’s container port, the Oakland International Airport, and 20 miles of waterfront including Jack London Square, a publicly owned utility. The container port alone imports more than \$22 billion worth of goods each year and exports nearly \$14 billion of goods, making it a global hub of trade and an economic engine for the city of Oakland.⁹⁶ As ordained by the City of Oakland Charter, the Board of Port Commissioners (nominated by the mayor and appointed by the City Council) has exclusive control and management over the port.⁹⁷ The Port of Oakland receives funding from state and local grants and generates operating revenue from leasing its space to businesses.⁹⁸ It also receives private funds from multiple business associations.⁹⁹

Oakland

	RANKING
Municipal Office of International Affairs	2
City Networks and Sister Cities	3
Tourism Association	3
City-Led Missions Abroad	5
Hosting Foreign Leaders	1
Government Resolutions and Statements	3
Office of Immigrant or Refugee Affairs	2

When the City of Oakland has engaged in international relations, the port has been at the center. In 2011, then mayor Jean Quan traveled to China as the leader of a city-led trade mission funded and organized by institutional sponsors of the Port of Oakland.¹⁰⁰ In 2023, Mayor Sheng Thao traveled to Vietnam for the same reason and with seemingly the same logistical and strategic approach. In addition to bringing interested private-sector actors from Oakland to meet with Vietnamese counterparts, the delegation was sponsored by two business associations that work closely with the port: the Bay Area Council and the Vietnamese American Business Association.¹⁰¹

Cooperation between the city and its port department is highly coordinated. Within the city’s Economic & Workforce Development Department (EWDD), international trade and transportation play a key role in municipal economic development strategy centered around the port. This department had, in 2018, a deputy director tasked with overseeing the

department’s international trade and transportation portfolio.¹⁰² This portfolio includes administering Oakland’s grant as a foreign-trade zone (FTZ), overseeing the EB-5 immigrant visa program, and maintaining productive relationships with the city’s sister cities.

There is also a City/Port Liaison Committee of Oakland, a group of City Council members and port commissioners who meet to share information and make minor decisions related to the port.¹⁰³ Leading up to and during the recent trade mission to Vietnam, the port and city government met with California state officials and U.S. government representatives in Vietnam, demonstrating high levels of coordination and strategy across multiple levels of government.¹⁰⁴

San José: A Trailblazer that Shifted Its Focus

San José has long maintained an international affairs manager within its Office of Economic Development and Cultural Affairs. This manager is responsible for a diverse portfolio focused on economic development and business community support.¹⁰⁵ They meet with international delegations, liaise with the U.S. commercial service and Department of Commerce in San José, facilitate the use of U.S. CHIPS Act funds, and manage the city’s own FTZ—one of seventeen grantees in California of this federal initiative of the International Trade Administration.¹⁰⁶

San José

	RANKING
Municipal Office of International Affairs	4
City Networks and Sister Cities	3
Tourism Association	3
City-Led Missions Abroad	1
Hosting Foreign Leaders	5
Government Resolutions and Statements	3
Office of Immigrant or Refugee Affairs	2

San José's record of global engagement is historic for California. In the 1950s, the city was a leader in the sister cities movement, becoming a charter member. Its relationship with Okiyama, Japan, is the third-oldest linkage in the United States. The international affairs manager position was first created in the 1990s, and, with additional funding from a regional federal export initiative, the office had been led by a director and supported by three contracted staff. The office has helped small businesses develop export markets, supported the recruitment of foreign business development in San José, and facilitated programs like the International Business Incubator in partnership with San José State University, UC Berkeley, and Stanford.¹⁰⁷

Throughout the 1990s, the international affairs team had broad support from the state-level California Trade and Commerce Agency and, through that, access to over a dozen international trade and investment offices abroad. This allowed the city to conduct trade missions in the 1990s and early 2000s to the United Kingdom, Finland, South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan. California trade and investment offices helped facilitate city missions abroad and local private-sector expansion into new markets. Those offices are mostly nonexistent today, and the role of the manager of international programs in San José has subsequently changed course.

In 2023, sister-city relationships helped San José host a delegation of business leaders from Taiwan.¹⁰⁸ In February 2024, San José Mayor Matt Mahan welcomed Dublin's Lord Mayor Daithí de Róiste to the city for a flag-raising ceremony and discussions on housing, human resources, arts and culture, climate and energy policy, and economic development.¹⁰⁹ (Representatives of San José previously traveled to Dublin every two years.) When the city hosts foreign delegations, its international affairs manager is joined in practice by a representative from another relevant city department, who will then carry forward any substantive agreements made between the city and its foreign counterpart.

Global Engagements in California's Cities: How have California's Global Cities Succeeded?

The global engagement of California cities has been the focus of officials and scholars for decades. In his 2009 book *Global California*, Abe Lowenthal noted that while global engagement increased in the twentieth century, there was an overall lack of coordinated international affairs policy throughout California.¹¹⁰ Since then, the practice of city diplomacy has evolved and accelerated and with it the component parts that shape and staff it. Since

2009, cities have expanded and professionalized their global engagements, setting up offices and designating point staff. Just fifteen years after Lowenthal's book was published, the entire landscape of global engagement has transformed at the local level.

Globally Oriented Leadership Provides the Impetus

Global components do not predict international affairs work, but leadership interest in it does. Much of this work is galvanized by ambitious leaders who aim to expand the global footprint of their city.

For instance, Long Beach has many ingredients for a strong international affairs strategy but does not engage in most of the activities tracked in the Global City Index. In 2019, then mayor Robert Garcia led a delegation from the Port of Long Beach on a nine-day trip to Singapore; Phnom Penh, Cambodia; and Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, for meetings with business leaders and government officials to promote trade through the port. However, Long Beach does not have an international affairs office or manager in government, and this trip appears to have been a one-off. Fresno, on the other hand, lacks many of the global components. It is a midsized city without a major port, university, sports team, office of immigrant affairs, or dedicated international affairs position. But Mayor Jerry Dyer has still embarked on several official trips abroad and has been active in engaging with global partners since 2022.

Leaders may also demonstrate interest in global engagement by passing resolutions or making public remarks on foreign affairs. There are numerous examples: Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass spoke in support of Armenian civilians and the Anaheim City Council passed a resolution in support of the Armenian American community after Azerbaijan attacked Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023.¹¹¹ The San Francisco City Board of Supervisors passed a resolution commending Iranian citizens in 2022 for protesting the death of Jina “Mahsa” Amini.¹¹² And Fresno banned caste discrimination in the city.¹¹³ Local governments are tuned in to global conversations and understand their constituents' desire to weigh in on global affairs. As a result, they are vocal about human rights issues abroad and often demonstrate their belief that their voices matter on the global stage.

Cities Have Staffed Up for International Affairs

At the time of writing, seven of the nine cities in this paper (all but Anaheim and Long Beach) have a point person for global engagements. These positions sometimes do not appear on government web pages, but they play an important role in cities' approaches to attracting foreign investment, supporting local businesses to expand to foreign markets, overseeing federal grants and foreign trade zones, and hosting foreign delegations.

Most Cities Have Self-Funding Tourism Associations

The importance of branding and tourism is not lost on California’s cities. Their tourism associations bring together diverse economic actors who are invested in boosting tourism and hosting conventions. Tourism associations often go on what could be called “sales missions,” meeting with tourism and hospitality industry stakeholders in countries across the world. These associations serve as brand ambassadors and agents of economic growth, usually at little or no cost to the city.

Ports Are Engines of International Relations

Many of the cities examined in this paper are home to large airports and container ports, which are generally self-funding departments under the auspices of the city. International airports and container ports in Los Angeles, San Diego, San Francisco, Sacramento, Oakland, and Long Beach are well-connected business associations with an intrinsic desire to seek out global partners.

Cities Do Not Widely Publicize Their Global Efforts

Cities often engage in international relations work quietly. To many residents—as Carnegie California found in its 2023 Global Affairs Survey—international relations may not be immediately relevant to the issues they want their city government officials to prioritize.¹¹⁴ Given this, most of the cities researched for this paper do not have public communications strategies for diplomatic efforts like mission trips abroad. Notable exceptions include cities like San Diego.

Cities Focus More on International Relations Today than in the Past

Over the past nearly two decades, cities across California have created offices dedicated to international relations. In 2010, three out of the nine cities studied for this paper had official offices or staff members dedicated to an international affairs portfolio: San Francisco, with its director of trade and commerce; Los Angeles, with its director of the office of international trade and development; and San José, with its international programs manager. In 2024, seven of the nine cities had an office or staff dedicated to international affairs. Offices of international affairs—in their various forms and functions—grant cities greater institutional capacity to engage in international affairs more strategically and with different approaches.

Conclusion

While the state of California continues to engage in sophisticated international relations work, so too do its cities. California cities host a multitude of global institutions and networks. Cities are leveraging these connections to engage in international activity that advances policy priorities at home. As more cities have institutionalized the work of international affairs by creating relevant offices, they are consequently doing so in an increasingly strategic manner, building capacity and delivering tangible results to residents.

City diplomacy in California—and in the United States more broadly—is a difficult business. It is not widely understood by both foreign policy specialists and local residents. What is more, cities face a lack of funding, interest, and administrative and structural resources dedicated to international relations work.

Despite these obstacles, cities are organizing trade missions abroad, signing memoranda of understanding with sister cities, administering FTZs, participating in city policy networks, partnering with hospitality associations and airports to boost tourism, and publishing speeches and resolutions commenting on foreign affairs. This work has expanded in cities across California in the past decade, and it appears this work will only continue to grow. In cities across California, it is likely that more global connections will be made, more trips will be planned, and loftier objectives will be developed for local trade, investment, learning, and connecting across the world.

Terms of Reference

Global Components

City Size and Resources: A combination of population and budget statistics.¹¹⁵

Consolidated Political System Over Urban Geography: A combination of city versus county budget proportions and an eye test of the presence of multiple incorporated cities within a single urban geography. If a densely populated area is governed by multiple layers of government, local power—such as revenue raising, rule of law, and agenda setting—would be dispersed among various actors and institutions. If the city is the only local government and has consolidated revenue-raising and agenda-setting ability, it would not be in competition with a county to make strategic decisions about business development, tourism, and regional and foreign partnerships.

International Airport: Presence of an international airport; number of direct international flights; annual passenger and flight volume data; and distance to nearby international airports.¹¹⁶

Container Port: Presence of a container port.¹¹⁷

Global Universities: Approximation of the number of foreign students enrolled in the largest colleges and universities in each city.¹¹⁸

Major Sports: *Forbes* list of fifty most-valuable global sports teams and presence of a so-called big four major sports team (from the National Hockey League, National Football League, Major League Baseball, or the National Basketball Association).¹¹⁹

Diplomatic Links: Combination of publicly available data on foreign consulates and permanent representations in U.S. cities.¹²⁰

United Nations and International Non-Governmental Organization Links: Based on publicly available data sets from the Globalization and World Cities (GAWC) Research Network at Loughborough University, which measures the network connectivity of UN agencies and international NGOs in cities around the world.¹²¹

International Business Links: Metropolitan area GDP data from the U.S. Federal Reserve and the Department of Commerce combined with one dataset from GAWC that tracks the presence of global headquarters of the world's 2,000 largest publicly traded corporations.¹²²

Global Recognition and Brand: A combination of the 2022 Anholt-Ipsos City Brands Index, California tourism statistics including tourism spending and revenue, and research from the Brookings Institution on global identity and visibility in U.S. cities.¹²³

Resident Connectivity: Census data for households with a broadband internet subscription, as well as select contextual data for each city. Inspired by the work of Klaus Segbers on “Content and Tech Ability Within the World’s Global City Regions,” in *Cities and Global Governance: New Sites for International Relations* (2016).¹²⁴

Foreign-Born Population: 2020 Census data and relevant demographic data.¹²⁵

Global Engagements

Municipal Office of International Affairs: A dedicated office of international affairs, an international trade and development coordinator, an international affairs portfolio within the office of government affairs, and other iterations of formal, institutionalized international affairs work at the municipal level.

City Networks and Sister City Memberships: Formal memberships in regional and international city networks and active and historical sister city relationships in the city.¹²⁶

Tourism Association: Coalitions of local travel, tourism, and hospitality industry stakeholders, usually called travel associations. Primary stakeholders include hotels, airlines, convention centers, and others interested in increasing tourism to a city. The highest rating relates to “sales missions” abroad to promote the city.

City-Led Missions Abroad: Delegation trips abroad. Examples of missions abroad include those organized by the city for specific policy-related purposes, and those organized by local chambers of commerce or World Trade Centers, with attendance by local public officials.

Hosting Foreign Leaders: Meetings, events, and coordinated engagements within the city between the local mayor or manager and a foreign leader.

Resolutions and Public Statements: City Council resolutions and public leader statements on global affairs.

Office of Immigrant or Refugee Affairs: Presence of an office or public institution dedicated to providing services to immigrants and/or refugees.

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