

Irvine mayor tries to make amends

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The Orange County Register

IRVINE - The mayor here has apologized to the mayor of Taoyuan, Taiwan, for an agreement signed last month with a new sister city in China pledging basically not to recognize Taiwan.

Still, about 100 people are expected to protest the agreement today at City Hall, where the City Council will discuss the faux pas and its longtime sister-city relationship with Taoyuan.

In the pact signed by an Irvine staffer, the city pledged to not send officials to Taiwan's "National Day" celebrations and never to refer to "two Chinas" or "one China, one Taiwan."

The agreement caused friction with Irvine's large Taiwanese community – there were 2,798 citizens in the 2000 U.S. Census. Orange County has 9,500 Taiwanese, one of the largest populations in the country.

The Irvine City Council will take up the issue at today's 3 p.m. meeting.

The Formosa Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to strengthening ties between Taiwan and the United States, is organizing the demonstration for 4 p.m. outside Irvine City Hall. Terri Giles, executive director of the Formosa Foundation, said Irvine's staff made a "terrible misstep" in signing the agreement, but that the main fault lies with the Chinese officials.

"This is China interfering with domestic issues and clearly making a non-political issue a political issue," Giles said. "Unfortunately I think the (Irvine) mayor got caught in this crossfire."

The president of the Irvine Sister Cities Foundation, James E. Dunning, is also questioning the agreement. He is calling a special board meeting of the foundation this morning to review the pact.

In a letter sent June 21 to the city, Dunning writes that the issue was not the fault of Valerie Larenne, the city's community partnerships administrator who signed the Irvine-Chinese agreement. He writes that she has been used as a scapegoat and that "affixing blame seems to be the more urgent priority" of the city.

Since 1990, Irvine has had a sister city relationship with Taoyuan, Taiwan. In 2000, the island underwent a transfer of power from the Nationalist Party to the Democratic Progressive Party. Last year, Beijing passed legislation outlawing Taiwan's succession and views it as a renegade province.

Irvine's other sister cities are Tsukuba, Japan, and Hermosillo, Mexico. The Sister Cities Foundation's goals include learning about other cultures, encouraging development in the paired cities, creating business opportunities and creating educational partnerships.

Register staff writers Greg Hardesty and Denisse Salazar contributed to this report.