



WORKING TOWARD A *greener* china

McWong International helps China get tools to clean up its cities

Steven Yoder

Last July, UC Berkeley physicists released a sobering study concluding that air pollution kills an average of 4,000 people per day in China. But the Chinese government has been trying to clean up its air and the image of its cities.

So it's looking for foreign expertise and products to create a new and cleaner model for its giant metropolises. Now Margaret Wong, CEO of Sacramento-based McWong International, is spearheading an effort to ensure U.S. companies win out in the global market to sell China what it needs to go greener.

It started with a trade mission — and years of inside-the-beltway networking. In 2012, Asian/Pacific Islander business leaders began talking about the need for a presence in Washington. In December that year, they launched the Asian/Pacific Islander American Chamber of Commerce and Entrepreneurship, known as ACE.



According to former ACE board chair Bill Imada, ACE began meeting with U.S. officials about the role Asian-American business leaders could play in pursuing trade overtures to Asia. During a meeting he attended early last year with leaders at the U.S. Department of Commerce, they told him they wanted to get Asian-American businesses more involved in trade missions. "We are a natural bridge between the U.S. and other countries," Imada says.

That discussion led the U.S. Departments of Commerce and Energy to pick Wong, at ACE's recommendation, for a trade mission last April organized by the two departments. Its focus was to better-understand China's goals for greening its urban infrastructure and showcasing U.S. companies' green-tech capabilities. With Wong on the trip were high-level U.S. officials and the leaders of 24 other U.S. firms that produce green-tech products.

That single trip in April could bring a flood of business to U.S. companies. Following discussions started on the mission, Wong took the lead to help participating companies form a consortium — the U.S. Smart Cities Alliance — that aims to offer Chinese planners the range of products and services they'll need to create their cities of the future. Aside from McWong, which makes lighting-control equipment and technology for wastewater treatment, its members range from international giants like Honeywell — a leader in the Internet of Things market — to small firms like Sensity Systems, a Sunnyvale company that builds smart lighting systems for public places.

In November, the Alliance signed an agreement with a Chinese provincial government to develop a smart-city demonstration project in one section of a new suburb that China is building south of Chengdu, the country's seventh-largest city. China envisions the new jurisdiction as offering an environmental model for the rest of the country.

The agreement allows Alliance companies to negotiate contracts to install an array of energy-saving and clean technologies there. Those may include solar panels with battery storage that deliver more efficient DC currents, smart grid systems that

"There's a lot of weight placed on relationships in China especially."

-Sach Takayasu, president, Asian/Pacific Islander American Chamber of Commerce

let building managers save electricity by automating when lights and other devices are powered up and down, rumble strips on sections of pavement that generate energy from tire friction, hydroponic rooftop farms, and solar-powered pods in public spaces that consumers can use to charge phones and laptops.

Along with a number of other U.S. firms, McWong is creating the master plan for that section. It will be a bit like Epcot Center in showcasing what's possible, says Gordon Hinkle, a spokesman for McWong who's also vice president at McWong's sister company, the California Center. The center, which promotes California exports to China, will set up a storefront of its own in the new suburb.

The Alliance will develop similar demonstrations in two other places: outside Beijing and in the city of Guangzhou further south. All three projects are still a year or two from being launched, says Wong.

Hinkle says Commerce officials tell him they've never seen a group like the Alliance that's functioned this well for this long after a trade mission. "Margaret Wong hit it out of the park," says current ACE president and CEO Sach Takayasu.

Though Hinkle has taken the lead in keeping the Alliance going, he and Wong have a bottom line of their own to worry about. So they're in the process of turning it into a nonprofit and hiring staff to run it.

Wong thinks California companies are perfectly situated to help China reboot its cities. The state's own environmental regulations — like its green-building codes — have forced the local industry to come up with new products, she says.

If the three demonstrations succeed, they could launch a round of city planning

projects throughout China, says Hinkle. In the world's largest market, that could mean millions of dollars in business flowing to Alliance companies.

But getting and keeping contracts will mean ongoing bridge-building by the U.S. Department of Commerce and groups like ACE and the CalAsian Chamber of Commerce, both known entities in China. "There's a lot of weight placed on relationships in China especially," Takayasu says. That's especially true in infrastructure projects, which are the province of the Chinese government. If U.S. companies are to land contracts, the Commerce Department needs to keep the Chinese government informed about U.S. firms' capabilities — and companies need to keep Commerce up to date on what they can offer, says Wong.

To that end, another trade mission is planned for late May or early June, led by the California Center and members of the Alliance, with support from the Commerce Department and other federal agencies. Hinkle says they're open to new companies joining. "Even though these 25 companies initiated the group, we're not exclusive," Hinkle says. "We're definitely willing to work with others that have their own great technologies or resources." ●

.....
Steven Yoder writes about business, real estate and criminal justice. His work has appeared in The Fiscal Times, Salon, The American Prospect and elsewhere. On Twitter @syodertweets and online at stevenyoder.net.

ILLUSTRATION: ISTOCK

