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VIRGINIA GOVERNOR CONCLUDES SUCCESSFUL TRADE MISSION IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE VIRGINIA ISRAEL ADVISORY BOARD

By: Jeffrey F. Brooke

Virginia Governor Robert F. McDonnell is just back from a successful trade mission to the State of Israel, and he is very pleased with the results.

For the Governor, the trip allowed him to combine two of his favorite past times, touting the benefits of doing business in Virginia and touring the Holy Land. A devout Christian, the Governor had visited Israel as Attorney General four years ago. He was especially happy to be invited by his own Virginia Israel Advisory Board, a group that serves directly under his authority. For several years, the Board has sought to engage governors and other elected officials in its mission of bringing Virginia business to Israel and Israeli exports to Virginia. Those efforts are fostered by the Board's Executive Director Ralph Robbins and nurtured by the multi-member board which is jointly appointed by the Governor and members of the General Assembly. The Governor's acceptance of the Board's invitation created excitement amongst the board members and the Virginia-Israel community and allowed Ralph Robbins to open many doors that would otherwise have been closed.



On Nov.11, the Governor arrived at Ben Gurion airport and began a series of high level meetings with business leaders, elected officials and thought leaders. A highlight of his trip was a meeting with President Shimon Peres. The Governor was also treated to a high level security briefing with Gen. (ret.) Amos Gilad and a private tour of Israel Aircraft Industries (one of the world's leading manufacturers of drone, satellite, and defense technology). The Governor was accompanied by board members Jeffrey Brooke and Mel Chaskin. Also on the trip were Virginia Secretary of Trade and Commerce Jim Cheng and Secretary of Agriculture Todd Haymore. A group of officials from the Virginia Economic Development Partnership (which is empowered to enter into development, tax credit, and grant agreements) accompanied the Governor and followed up with a host of companies which expressed interest in coming to Virginia or expanding existing operations in the Commonwealth.

Virginia's efforts to promote itself in Israel have spawned several successes in recent years. In particular, the location of Zim American International Shipping Company in Norfolk and the establishment of a substantial hummus processing factory in Chesterfield County Virginia (operated by the Strauss International Food Group) stand out. Both companies were on hand along with representatives of the Israel Manufacturers' Association and other trade groups as the Governor repeated his "stump speech" on the benefits of doing business in Virginia. Israeli business leaders were clearly impressed with the Governor's promotion of the state and with the Commonwealth's recent ranking as "#1 for business" by several recent trade publications.

Along the way, the Governor found time for cultural touring and shared a private inspection (with the author and his daughter, Chana a seminary student in Jerusalem) of the City of David archeological site.

Tour participants were clearly impressed with the Governor's ability to reach out to Israelis of all types and in all industries. While the success of the trade mission in one sense will be measured by the number of trade deals announced in months to come, there is great satisfaction in seeing the manner in which our elected officials take to the State of Israel and come to understand its special but precarious position in the world. In this respect the Virginia Israel Advisory Board continues to serve an important function not just with regard to Virginia trade, but in educating our leaders and other constituents is the ongoing importance of the Virginia-Israel relationship.

The Community Relations Council of the Federation and the Republican Jewish Coalition have tentatively set a briefing for the afternoon of Sunday Dec. 18 to discuss state funding for the VIAB and to debrief members of the community on the Governor's trade mission.