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More of our Swedish friends will be droppin' in

The shortest distance between two points on a flat planet may be a relationship.

So goes the thinking about the relationship between Sweden and Rockford, aka Swede Town USA. Rockford's Swedish connection is a continuous thread stretching from the city's early days into the future.

It's true that technology allows businesses to operate almost anywhere on the leveled planet. But decisions about where and with whom to connect are multidimensional.

Local leaders in government, business, tourism and the arts will play host to about 100 Swedish visitors to Rockford next week. These leaders in business and industry will be in Chicago to attend Swedish-American Entrepreneurial Days, which focuses on promoting trade relationships between the countries.

Rockford gets in on the action — a large delegation from the convention will spend time here over three days — because of its proximity to Chicago and because of aggressive efforts of local economic development officials. Relationships will determine whether the trip pays off for us and for the Swedes.

The headline visitors are Gunnar Lund, ambassador of Sweden to the United States, and Joran Hagglund, state secretary to the Swedish Minister for Enterprise and Energy. As important to Rockford's future are the businesspeople and government officials from Borgholm, Rockford's "sister city," and from Lidkoping, a city that is becoming an important business partner for our county.

There is a serendipitous quality to good relationships that is difficult to predict. Who could have known that a big conference of Swedish entrepreneurs in Chicago would coincide with a world-class exhibit featuring two of Sweden's most famous artists at the Rockford Art Museum?

The exhibit, "He & She," features husband-wife glass artists Bertil Vallien and Ulrica Hydman-Vallien. The event would have been welcomed at any leading museum in this country, museum director Linda Dennis said, yet the artists chose Rockford because of its Swedish roots.

Lund and Hagglund asked specifically to see the exhibit. They will remember Rockford as not only eager to establish trade relationships with Sweden, but as the place that appreciates Swedish culture.

Relationships don't just happen. It took at least two years of frequent communication and collaboration among arts groups, government and business to pull off "He & She," Dennis said.

Mayor Larry Morrissey stressed that the Swedish companies and other global enterprises are interested in places that appreciate culture. It's all about quality of life. Communities that offer a rich cultural environment also are more able to attract investment.

Next week, the visiting Swedes will see the best of what Rockford has to offer culturally, aesthetically and industrially. Besides the art museum, they will see the Coronado Theatre, Anderson Gardens, the Erlander Home Museum and other city highlights. They will be wined and dined and treated like royalty. Better yet, they'll be treated like friends.

Maybe they'll travel that straight line between Sweden and Rockford again soon, next time to do business.

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