

Speech by MN Senator Fong Hawj on the occasion of the July 14, 2018, St. Paul-Changsha China Friendship Garden Groundbreaking Ceremony at Phalen Regional Park

Hello Everyone! Nyob Zoo Suav Dlawg.

Today is an exciting day for us as we introduce to the public the St. Paul-Changsha Friendship Garden, or Lub Vaaj Paaj Phooj Ywg. It is so refreshing to see all of you here representing the diversity of America at this wonderful celebration.

It has been a very long time since St. Paul and Changsha formally became sister-cities in 1988. And a lot has changed since then. On a personal note, I visited our sister city, Changsha, 25 years ago for the First Hmong International Symposium. Little did I know then that St. Paul and Changsha had already been sister-cities several years prior. Many Mayors have taken office since, in both cities and continued to strengthen our relationship.

It has also been a long-awaited anticipation even for me since the Friendship Garden plan came to my consideration about 4 years ago. I have been inspired by every positive step and admire the determination of those who got us to this point.

Why build it here in the East Side St. Paul, I asked. Why is it here? Well, “why not?” First, because it is the St. Paul-Changsha Friendship Garden, so it has to be in our city. Where else would St. Paul rather have this Friendship Garden than on the Willow banks of Lake Phalen here in the East Side?

I’m sure folks in other parts of our city would not hesitate to take on this project. But why let them have it? Why let them have her? That would mean we will have to go there to visit.

Why not build her here closer to home and make others come our way? Would you agree?

Thanks to the City of St. Paul, the District 5 Council and the City Council for making the East Side and Lake Phalen as the location for this project. I also applaud our lakeside neighbors for working very hard to bring this project into fruition. Thanks to the cultural partnerships like the Chinese American Community, the Hmong-American community, and others. And thanks to the mass supporters of the East Side and the many donors from grassroots level who contributed the most money raised for this project. You made this happen!

To those who missed the opportunity to give your support, it’s still not too late. You can contact the city or the Friendship Garden Society.

Also, I am humbled to thank the indigenous people, the original caretakers of this land for keeping this place in harmony with nature, and now it’s becoming harmonious with wetlands on the other side of the world.

This is a blessing in disguise, because the garden could be put anywhere else in St. Paul, but fate brought her here to the East Side where it has historically been the home for immigrants, and today it is the home for the largest Hmong-American community in Minnesota.

As a Minnesota State Senator of Hmong descent, I could not be more content to have this ancient replica of peace and tranquility, and the Hmong heritage wall made from the home of my ancestors to be placed here in the district that I represent. Nearly 240 years ago, my people were driven out of China to Laos in our own trail of tears. The scars of grief still remain.

A couple of naysayers preferred that I stayed idle, and let this gift exchanges come to pass without my involvement and perhaps without the involvement of Hmong community? But that would be my forfeit, and my forfeit alone. Today, as Hmong-Americans we will not let fear and negativity agitate, confuse or startle us, but we will embrace the opportunity to forgive the past.

After all, this is a friendship garden - a symbol of goodwill and diplomacy. We must take on opportunities like this and rise to the occasion, THAT WE ARE HERE. We, the cast-out orphans of China, have survived through countless hardship and tragedies from one nation to another. Today, we are here in the 21st century of America standing proud with all St. Paulites and all people opening up our arms to host the St. Paul-Changsha Friendship Garden. There's no better action than Unity and the kindness ... of our hearts.

While the meaning of this project varies from one person to another, I for one see this Friendship Garden as a knowledge gateway between our two cities, St. Paul and Changsha. We have so much to learn from each other to strengthen our relationship, our common bonds, and our social-economic Prosperity as well as giving our children the possibility to see beyond their current surroundings.

This Friendship Garden will also keep me grounded in my roots and give me the insights and strength to continue to rebuild our future and to stand for peace. At times, when our 2 nations, US and China, stand in challenge, let it never be our two sister cities. At times, when the bond of our sister-cities stretches thin, let it never be so between our Hmong families here and those abroad. We are the essence that will bring everyone together and make St. Paul the most welcoming city in Minnesota.

The Friendship Garden will bring people from near and far, from within the state and international. You will bring our Hmong-Chinese here to take many pictures when they come to visit. May everyone find peace here and the clarity for understanding. May we find love, hope, and comfort, and may all who come here, come for friendship, unity and the determination to better Minnesota.

May God bless our two sister-cities. May God bless the East Side.

Thank you.