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Youngkin on track to complete handful of trade missions

By Morgan Sweeney | The Center Square

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(The Center Square) — Halfway through his governorship, Virginia Gov. Glenn Youngkin is currently on an overseas trip to Western Europe, visiting

Germany, Denmark, Finland and Switzerland in his third international trade mission as governor.

He previously received some attention for what appeared to be a less aggressive tack to trade missions than some of his predecessors – certainly Gov. Terry McAuliffe with his record of 35. If Youngkin keeps his current pace, he will be on track to finish five or six trade missions before leaving office.

But an in-person trip isn't always necessary, given the relationships Youngkin cultivated during his 25-year career in private equity, according to a Youngkin adviser.

"The governor's Rolodex is pretty extensive," the adviser said. "I don't think there has been a governor that is as well-connected in different industries as the governor is from all around the world."

The adviser added that Youngkin views trade missions as opportunities to be directly involved in ongoing economic development efforts – whether kicking them off or closing a deal – as the Virginia Economic Development Partnership, the Virginia Port Authority, and the Virginia Department of Agricultural and Consumer Services and other commonwealth organizations work on deals across the globe year-round.

"It takes a lot of resources to go overseas, so getting the most out of it is very important to him," the adviser said. "He'll always schedule a 7 AM breakfast or a 6:30 breakfast because he has contacts in that area and he tries to have as many meetings as possible."

Others, like Stuart Malawer, distinguished professor emeritus from George Mason University's Schar School of Policy and Government, would like to see Youngkin make more of a personal investment in trade missions. Malawer served on the Virginia Economic Development Partnership and the Virginia International Trade Advisory Commission, and joined trade missions with Govs. Tim Kaine and Mark Warner.

"It seems to me that Gov. Youngkin is off to a bit of a late start, but we have a few years to see how it really plays out," Malawer told The Center Square. "I'm hopeful that he'll become a little more active in that area."

Youngkin didn't engage in any trade missions, domestic or international, during his first year in office – atypical for recent Virginia governors, according to reporting by The Washington Post in 2022.

Malawer firmly believes governor-led trade missions are most valuable to the state.

"You can never make a deal by just making a phone call. When I was with Gov. Warner in Mumbai, I was having a discussion with someone from the Chamber of Commerce, and he said to me, he said, 'Why would anyone want to talk to anyone on a trade mission unless it's led by the governor?'"

Though Youngkin did establish a new trade office in Taiwan, Malawer also believes the governor has allowed politics to negatively interfere with Virginia trade. Malawer was disappointed that a Chinese Ford battery plant chose in 2023 to go to Michigan rather than build in the commonwealth because Youngkin considered it a national security risk.

"It's just too bad domestic politics took over at that point," said Malawer, who believes the future of trade lies with Asia. "India, China, Vietnam, Indonesia, Japan, of course, Korea, of course – I would keep politics out of those trade missions and focus on promoting trade for the benefit of Virginia corporations and also for the benefits of attracting foreign investment into Virginia."

One thing Malawer noted Youngkin has done that can help attract automobile manufacturers, however, is continue site development efforts started under the Northam administration. Large businesses often look for states where they can build and habilitate new locations quickly, and they depend on site development for that. Todd Haymore, a former Virginia Secretary of Agriculture and Commerce and Trade who has been on 60 trade missions with Kaine, McDonnell and McAuliffe, echoed Malawer's comments applauding the state's progress in site readiness in recent years.

"The state, in working with localities, has to be able to move at the speed of business. Virginia now is better positioned to move at the speed of business because of the new investments that the state and localities have made in site readiness," Haymore said.

As for the selection of Western Europe for this trade mission, Haymore trusts the selection process and believes it will be worth it for the commonwealth.

"Governors are working very closely with Virginia agencies... on making sure that if they're leaving the commonwealth and they're going to a foreign country, they are going there to talk about leads and potential deals they can

bring home to the commonwealth,” Haymore said. “In Europe, you’re able to cover a lot of ground in a relatively short period of time that allows you to see as many business and industry recruitment opportunities as possible.”

Youngkin will wrap up his trip to Western Europe on Friday.