

Virginia leaders launch Engage Cuba State Council

01/02/2017



Leaders from across the Commonwealth launched on Monday the bipartisan [Engage Cuba Virginia State Council](#). The council, which is chaired by Governor Terry McAuliffe (D-VA), will build statewide support for pro-engagement policies and urge Congress to lift the Cuban embargo that continues to disadvantage Virginia and the Cuban people. Removing trade restrictions on Cuba could open opportunities for Virginia businesses and empower the Cuban people.

Virginia becomes the 16th state to join [Engage Cuba](#), a D.C.-based advocacy organization dedicated to advancing federal legislation to lift the Cuban embargo.

“Increasing trade with Cuba, a growing market of 11 million people, could strengthen Virginia’s agriculture, port, and other top export industries, create jobs across the Commonwealth, and help improve the lives of Cuban people. But until Congress lifts arbitrary travel and trade restrictions, Virginia farmers and businesses will be stuck on the sidelines as foreign competitors move into Cuba’s emerging markets,” **said James Williams President of Engage Cuba.** “We applaud Gov. Terry McAuliffe and Sens. Mark Warner and Tim Kaine for their support in improving relations with Cuba and advancing legislation to end 55

years of failed policy.”

Under the leadership of Governor Terry McAuliffe (D-VA), honorary chair of the **Engage Cuba Virginia State Council**, and Sens. Mark R. Warner and Tim Kaine (both D-VA), Virginia has long been a leader in U.S.-Cuba trade. In October 2015, Governor McAuliffe joined eight other governors from across the country to co-sign a bi-partisan letter to the leaders of Congress calling for an end to the remaining trade and travel restrictions against Cuba.

In January 2016, under Gov. McAuliffe, the Virginia Port Authority [signed an agreement](#) with Cuba’s newly constructed Port of Mariel, now the largest port in the Caribbean, to facilitate trade and increase vessel services between the two ports. Gov. McAuliffe also signed a higher education agreement between Virginia Commonwealth University and the University of Havana, during the January marketing and collaboration mission to Cuba.

”I’m honored to serve as honorary chair of the newly-announced Engage Cuba Virginia State Council, an important step in continuing our efforts to lift the embargo against Cuba and promote mutually beneficial trade between the Commonwealth and Cuba,” **said Governor Terry McAuliffe, speaking about the announcement.** “Virginia enjoys a uniquely positive economic relationship with Cuba, including being the top state for agricultural exports to Cuba in 2015. However, our Virginia businesses have been hampered by more than fifty years of failed policies of economic and political isolation against Cuba. It is time for Congress to lift the financial, trade and travel restrictions which impede normal commerce and trade between our nations, and allow our businesses to forge new partnerships and capitalize on new investments in this growing market.”

In 2002, then Gov. Mark Warner signed a [million-dollar agriculture export deal](#) with Cuba for the first time in 40 years. Since then, the Commonwealth has been a leading U.S. supplier of agricultural products to Cuba. However, outdated laws force Virginia farmers and businesses to comply with arbitrary restrictions on trade with Cuba. In Congress, Sens. Warner and Kaine have co-signed the [Agricultural Export Expansion Act](#) to remove restrictions on offering private financing for the export of agricultural commodities to Cuba. Additionally, both Virginia senators have signed the [Freedom to Travel to Cuba Act](#) to lift the tourist travel ban on Cuba.

“Virginia is positioned to benefit from an expanded relationship with Cuba, which is less than a three-day sail from the Port of Virginia. Already, Virginia trades more with Cuba than all but a couple of states – a trading partnership that dates back to my time as governor, when we signed a million-dollar agricultural export deal with Cuba. Because of our existing trade relationship, loosening trade restrictions with Cuba would create more economic opportunities for Virginia to sell everything

from information technology to heavy equipment,” **said U.S. Sen. Mark Warner.** “Improving relations with the U.S. could put Cuba on a path to strong economic growth over time and increase Cuba’s buying power. I’ve long believed that the best way we can empower the Cuban people to build a better future for themselves is through more engagement between our two nations.”

“I firmly believe that U.S. engagement with Cuba, after more than half a century of isolation, is a more effective approach for advancing U.S. interests and democratic values in Cuba and the broader Latin American region,” **said U.S. Sen. Tim Kaine.** “I am pleased to support initiatives like Engage Cuba which will now be bringing its mission to? Norfolk. I know Engage Cuba will be an effective partner in expanding Virginia’s agricultural exports and promoting trade and travel between our two nations.”

As a port state, Virginia has a unique opportunity to export goods and services from a wide variety of industries to Cuba and expand its commercial shipping capacity. Not only would increasing exports to Cuba help Virginia’s ports, but also Virginia’s top exports industries, industrial machinery, electrical machinery, plastics, vehicles, and aircraft. Other major Virginia exports that could be relevant for Cuba are raw materials, such as wood and aluminum for building and pulp paper products. Many of these products are already imported by Cuba from other countries, but they could represent new markets for Virginia businesses.

“As the Commonwealth’s largest private industry, agriculture has benefited greatly from Virginia’s strong trading relationship with Cuba, which has led to approximately \$441 million in agricultural exports to the country over the past decade,” **added Virginia Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry Basil I. Gooden, PhD.** “While Virginia agriculture exports to Cuba have been steady since 2003, and we are thankful for that business, there is still much unrealized trade opportunity between the Commonwealth and Cuba. Virginia will not be able to take advantage of these opportunities until all of the trade and travel restrictions that hinder Virginia agricultural exports to Cuba, and Cuba’s exports to the U.S., are addressed. I am honored to serve on the Engage Cuba Virginia State Council to pursue efforts to eliminate these barriers and establish free trade between the U.S. and Cuba.”

“We are very proud of the work and relationships we’ve developed with Cuban officials in Washington, D.C. and in Havana over the years, but our work is not finished,” **commented Virginia Secretary of Commerce and Trade Todd Haymore.** “Like the Governor, I’m hopeful that the newly launched Virginia State Council of Engage Cuba will serve as a catalyst for more positive change and create new opportunities for other sectors of the new Virginia economy, such as healthcare and technology, as the relationship between the U.S. and Cuba continues to evolve and improve. It is time for our representatives in Congress, in

partnership with Senators Kaine and Warner to move in a new direction and make a bold policy shift that will benefit both the American and the Cuban people.”

In addition to Virginia, Engage Cuba has launched state councils in 15 states, including Arkansas, Alabama, Georgia, Iowa, Louisiana, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Ohio, Tennessee, Texas, Idaho, Colorado, and New Mexico. More information on Engage Cuba State Councils is available [here](#).
