A delegation of more than business owners and civic leaders is on a trade mission to Africa this week, visiting Kigali, Rwanda, and Kenya.

A delegation of business owners and civic leaders from the US city of St Louis is in Rwanda this week on a trade mission, and is set to formalise a sister city relationship with Kigali.

The group, led by St Louis Mayor Cara Spencer and St Louis County Executive Dr Sam Page, met the chief executive of the Rwanda Development Board (RDB) Jean-Guy Afrika and Sports Minister Nelly Mukazayire on Monday.

Discussions focused on expanding cooperation in tourism, sports, trade and investment, with opportunities for partnerships in agriculture, healthcare, biotechnology, education and innovation. The talks build on existing ties between Rwanda and St Louis, with the aim of advancing institutional and business partnerships.

The visit is the first trade mission to Africa led by World Trade Center St Louis. The sister city agreement with Kigali will be the first new one for St Louis in more than a decade,

Tim Nowak, the centre’s executive director, said the relationships formed on the trip could lead to connections for industries, universities and organizations.

“We are a global city. We have connections that span the globe, and we need to be growing those,” he said.

Several African nations are among the world’s fastest-growing economies, with rising populations and investment in sectors such as technology, finance and renewable energy.

According to World Bank figures, Rwanda’s economy grew from $2.14bn in 2003 to $14.81bn in 2023.

“We see where the world is going. What Asia was for me when I was growing up is what Africa will be for our children. The population will double by 2050,” Mr Nowak said.

Agriculture at the centre

Several St Louis institutions already work in Rwanda, particularly in agriculture. Giles Oldroyd, president of the Danforth Plant Science Center, said it has partnerships in Rwanda, Kenya and Ethiopia.

The centre works with farmers to strengthen production, including developing virus-resistant cassava with Bayer Crop Science.

“Our work in Africa is focused on food security. But there’s a lot of opportunity to facilitate the ag tech ecosystem as well,” Mr Oldroyd said. He added that companies that move early in African markets “will be the ones to benefit”.

Zellipah Githui, who owns Gitzell Fair Trade, a St Charles importer of baskets and other African handmade goods, is also in Kigali making connections. She grew up in Kenya.

“Business is very good. St Louis is very supportive,” she said. “Africa is no longer the pity continent. It’s the next frontier.”

On to Kenya

The delegation is also visiting Nairobi, where it will network with entrepreneurs and government officials. Kenya’s economy grew from $14.9bn in 2003 to $107.5bn in 2023, according to the World Bank.