October brought an onslaught of Vikings to the UK’s capital, when Minnesota's American football team, named in honour of the state’s Scandinavian heritage, played the Pittsburgh Steelers at London’s Wembley stadium.

Most professional football teams in the US bear city rather than state names. But in the case of Minnesota, its professional sports teams prefer not to choose whether to fly the flag for Minneapolis, the state’s largest city, or St Paul, its capital and second largest city, which sits less than 15 kilometres away on the other side of the Mississippi River. The local baseball team keeps it simple by calling itself the Minnesota Twins, a nod to the ‘twin cities’ moniker used to refer to Minneapolis and St Paul.

Identity issues
As is often the case with twins, the two cities have historically had a close yet complicated relationship, marked by identity issues. Visiting London to cheer on the Vikings – who triumphed over the Steelers – and promote the merits of investing in Minnesota at the same time, the mayors of the twin cities were keen to highlight that they are very much on the same team.

Asked what differences exist between the two cities economically and in terms of FDI specialisations, Minneapolis mayor Raymond Thomas Rybak answers bluntly: “None.”

“I’m serious,” he insists.

St Paul mayor Christopher Coleman, who, like Mr Rybak, is a Democrat, backs him up. “People try and look for those distinctions and we ourselves looked for them historically but what we realised is no one else looks at us as two cities. If you’re an outsider you don’t see the Mississippi River as a divide, you just see it as a body of water that is flowing through this incredibly rich region,” he says.

Both point to the example of London’s Thames River, just outside the window of the Financial Times’ office where they are chatting with fDi, as a visible parallel. “You go through London and you pass through a number of different cities but it’s one metropolitan area – you do the same in our area,” says Mr Rybak. “What happens to be on the Minneapolis side or St Pauls side of the river is about as relevant on what’s on either side of the river in London.”

Double act
The dual nature of their city-region and the resultant splitting of data into two does put Minneapolis-St Paul at a disadvantage when it comes to performance indicators and rankings – a frustration for regional officials. To compensate, “we spend a lot of time taking about Minneapolis-St Paul”, says Mr Rybak.

Things were not always so joined up. “We used to say ‘don’t go to Minneapolis, come to St Paul’ and that turned off everybody who was interested in coming to the region,” says Mr Rybak. He remembers the CEO of a company headquartered in St Paul telling him that when he goes to scout out expansion locations and gets greeted at the airport by 10 different people representing various interests then he knows it is not a cohesive community. The message made an impact.

Now, he says: “We’ve really got our coordinated act together.”
A decade ago, Bruce Katz, an urban policy expert at think tank the Brookings Institution, was brought in to advise on how the region could create a common business agenda. Step one was convening a group of local business and political leaders as well as academics to lay out a strategy, which has been followed ever since. A regional council of mayors, meanwhile, brings together the mayors of the relevant communities in the region.

The plan also called for the creation of a single economic development entity that would promote the assets of the 16-county region and take a united message out to the world. Michael Langley, a former Navy pilot and technology executive who had led successful regional economic development organisations in Florida and Pennsylvania, was brought in to head up the effort. As CEO of the Minneapolis St Paul Regional Economic Development Partnership, known as Greater MSP, Mr Langley says: “This is the best product I have ever had to sell as an economic developer.”

**Better together**

Mr Langley points out that Mr Katz’s recently published book, *The Metropolitan Revolution*, a distillation of his work on the emerging metropolitan-led ‘next economy’, further bolsters the case for regional integration. “In the book he talks about the imperative of this regional construct and the fact that the 12% of the US geography which is MSAs [metropolitan statistical areas] accounts for 92% of our GDP. So, around this concentration of talent, based on investment in metropolitan regions, is how we should organise.”

He will find no argument from the two twinned mayors. “It has been really successful, from our standpoint, to have a regional voice, not a bunch of voices within the region,” says Mr Rybak.

His counterpart Mr Coleman says that by banding together, the city-region can offer something for every type of investor. “The thing about the MSP region is the diversity. Say you really want to be where there are Fortune 500 companies, or you want to be where there’s a leading research institution in the university, we have that. Or you want to be somewhere with some of the best medical facilities in the world, and where there are some of the largest and most important cultural institutions in the US,” he says.

“I don’t think there’s any region in the country that has more to offer, whether it’s a company looking to locate or an individual looking where they can raise a family and they’re going to live. The twin cities are incredibly diverse, incredibly rich and supportive particularly of young entrepreneurs who want to make a go of it.”

These days, when welcoming new arrivals to the region, only one greeter might show up at the airport, and officials insist they won’t complain no matter which side of the river wins the investment.