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D.I. Smith: Nation's counties committed to working toward economic recovery

County officials see stronger partnership with Congress, Administration

WASHINGTON, D.C.– D.I. SMITH, Madison County Supervisor, District 3, recently returned from the nation's capital with a new sense of optimism about Restoring the Partnership between counties and the federal government, but remained concerned about the tough economic times and difficult decisions that await county officials in the months ahead.

Supervisor D.I. Smith participated in the National Association of Counties (NACo) 2009 Legislative Conference, March 7-11, in Washington, D.C., which featured remarks from four U.S. cabinet secretaries. One of the main objectives of the Legislative Conference is to bring county and federal government officials together to discuss key priorities and specific legislation, regulations and funding levels affecting local government services and programs.

“Like many counties, our county is struggling to maintain the level of services and programs our residents have come to expect,” D.I. Smith said. “I believe strongly that in these tough economic times we need to communicate our needs and challenges directly to the administration and Congress. The NACo Legislative Conference in Washington, D.C. afforded me that opportunity supported through the strength of 2,000 county officials speaking with one voice.”

D.I. Smith serves on two of NACo's important committees: Telecommunications & Technology Steering Committee; and the Information Technology Standing Committee – where he was able to bring first hand knowledge and experience to the forums, committee meeting, and educational seminars relating to the integration of micro-blogging, social networking, BLOGs, web sites and bulk email programs. Additionally, he was providing real time web updates of the highlights and proceeding of the conference via the Twitter micro blogging program using his Blackberry. One attendee joked that they didn't know Mississippi had running water and electricity and were greatly surprised they were able to learn so much about this technology and its application from someone from Mississippi!!!

Additionally, D.I. Smith was able to meet and talk with Senator Wicker, Senator Cochran, Senator Trent Lott, Congressman Greg Harper, and Congressman Travis Childers.

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The economy and the recently-enacted economic stimulus package were the main themes of the conference. County priority provisions contained in the stimulus package included \$1 billion for the Community Development Block Grants (CDBG), \$2 billion for the Neighborhood Stabilization Program (NSP), \$2.25 billion for HOME Investment Partnerships, \$2.8 billion for Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant (EECBG), and other programs as well.

Featured guest speakers included U.S. Department of Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Secretary Shaun Donovan, U.S. Department of Energy Secretary Steven Chu, U.S. Department of Interior Secretary Ken Salazar, White House Senior Advisor to the President for Intergovernmental Relations Valerie Jarrett, and NBC News Chief White House Correspondent Chuck Todd. (See summary of remarks below)

“NACo is committed to Restore the Partnership between the federal government and America’s counties,” said NACo President Don Stapley, supervisor, Maricopa County, Ariz. “The stimulus bill is a welcomed and historic first step by the administration and Congress toward that goal. It is our intention to continue to build on this early success and our accomplishments at this conference.”

Stapley reported at Monday’s general session that NACo is already enjoying “a seat at the table” with the new administration. He said NACo President-elect Valerie Brown, supervisor, Sonoma County, Calif., was the only elected official other than members of Congress to attend the March 5 White House Summit on Health Care. In addition, Stapley, Brown and NACo Executive Director Larry E. Naake were appointed to serve on Vice President Joe Biden’s American Reinvestment and Recovery Act Implementation Advisory Committee.

County officials who sit on NACo’s 11 policy steering committees review and make recommendations on issues and legislation important to counties and communities. The policy development process initiated by the steering committees leads to the publication of the American County Platform, which NACo uses as a guide to deliver the county government message to the administration, Congress and the American public.

NACo’s steering committees consider issues such as justice and public safety, agriculture and rural affairs, taxes, environment and energy, telecommunications, economic and community development, healthcare, human services, education, labor and employment, public lands, and transportation. In addition, NACo has organized caucuses to perform targeted advocacy efforts focused on specific needs of large urban counties and rural counties. The Rural Action Caucus and the Large Urban County Caucus adopt their priority issues from NACo’s Legislative Platform.

In addition, several pre-conference seminars designed to help county officials strengthen their leadership skills were held.

For more information, contact Jim Philipps at 202/942-4220 or jphilipps@naco.org.

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The National Association of Counties (NACo) is the only national organization that represents county governments in the United States. Founded in 1935, NACo provides essential services to the nation’s 3,068 counties. NACo advances issues with a unified voice before the federal government, improves the public’s understanding of county government, assists counties in finding and sharing innovative solutions through education and research, and provides value-added services to save counties and taxpayers money. For more information about NACo, visit www.naco.org

National Association of Counties (NACo)
2009 Legislative Conference
March 7-11, 2009, Washington, D.C.

Valerie Jarrett, White House Senior Advisor to the President for Intergovernmental Relations

Jarrett is serving in a key intergovernmental position at the White House, which NACo officials hope to build a close working relationship with on behalf of counties. During the Opening General Session on Monday, March 9, she related her longstanding ties to NACo legislative affairs staff and her enthusiasm for her new job working with local governments. "I feel like I'm home again."

Chief White House Correspondent Chuck Todd, NBC News

At the opening general session March 9, Chuck Todd passed along his observations about the new political climate in Washington. He said it is easy to do President Barack Obama's job when times are good, but the real test comes in handling moments of crisis. In his first 50 days in office Obama has tackled several major issues, prompting some to ask if the new administration is trying to do too much. "The political reality says that 70 percent of a president's political accomplishments happen in the first year," said Todd. "I would say it's in the first nine months. For the rest of their four or eight years they are in reactive mode. During the first nine months, you get to push what you want." He said Rahm Emmanuel, White House chief of staff, had the right strategy in focusing on several issues at once, instead of just one. He brought up Hillary Clinton's attempt at health care reform as an example of how an issue can be shot down if opponents have time to unite and rail against it. By presenting three or four issues at once, he said it is tougher for opponents to nail a single issue down and defeat it.

Secretary Shaun Donovan, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

Donovan promised HUD would be a new partner with counties. "You have my commitment to a new HUD as a new partner." He urged counties to be sure that the new money in the stimulus package is spent quickly and wisely. In the long-term, we must not only look at home ownership, but must also make rental housing a real viable alternative. To help build sustainable communities we must be working looking longer term. Donovan spoke during Tuesday's General Session on March 10.

Secretary Ken Salazar, U.S. Department of Interior

Announced full funding for Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILT), a decision that would not have happened without the help of NACo. "One of the big achievements in the early days of the Obama administration is that he has signed a bill that says Payment in Lieu of Taxes is not subject to appropriation," said Salazar. "You will get full payment at least until the year 2012." The Department of the Interior has been pigeonholed for far too long as the department of the West, or the department that can only pass out leases for oil, gas and coal production, he said. He said that while all of this is important, the department is for all of America. He outlined five priorities the department will focus on under the Obama Administration: energy, global warming, youth involvement in conservation corps, Native American communities, and water issues. Salazar spoke during Tuesday's General Session on March 10.

Secretary Janet Napolitano, U.S. Department of Homeland Security

Napolitano spoke to county officials during the members' luncheon March 11 about the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and its goals for the next year. She touched on three issues the department will be focusing on: FEMA, grants and the economy/budgetary issues. "FEMA is not the first responders to a crisis. Counties are," said Napolitano. "We have to get people out of that mindset." Using the example of the Kentucky ice storm this past winter, Napolitano said that with the help of counties and close integration, the governmental perception of FEMA can move forward in a positive light.

With budgetary concerns and the economy, Napolitano stated that people know how bad off the current state of the economy is but that working together is the only way to avoid major budgetary issues and limit the number of constraints. "My job as secretary is to keep things moving forward and to work closely with counties. That is our mission and that is our job," said Napolitano.

Secretary Steven Chu, U.S. Department of Energy

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act includes \$3 billion to promote state and local initiatives through the U.S. Department of Energy's (DOE) Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant program, Energy Secretary Steven Chu told a General Session audience on March 10. To receive funding, counties with more than 200,000 residents can apply for certain grants directly to DOE. Smaller counties will be eligible to receive funding through their states, and all counties can vie for \$400 million in competitive funds directly from DOE, he added. For more information, visit www.doe.org/recovery. The money will support home energy audits, weatherization programs and energy-efficiency retrofits — such as making traffic lights and street lights more energy efficient. “It’s going to be a new day in Washington for the Department of Energy,” Chu said, “and we want to be a ready and willing, customer-friendly partner.” He said President Obama has set a goal of doubling the federal investment in the sciences. Chu said his agency also is broadly reorganizing its procedures for granting direct loans, loan guarantees and funding.

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