

**To:** Mayor and City Council  
cc: John Lamerato, Acting City Manager  
Lori Grigg Bluhm, City Attorney

**From:** Robin Beltramini, Council Member

**Subject:** NLC's Congressional Cities Conference, March 11-15, 2006  
Washington D.C.

**Date:** May 1, 2006

First, thank you for allowing me to represent the City of Troy at this event. It was a wonderful opportunity to learn about pending legislation, federal and in the various states, to network and learn from other city officials, and to speak with members of Congress regarding city issues. I spent the first portion of my time in Washington at committee meetings and attending a training seminar.

Committee Meetings:

*City Futures Panel on Democratic Governance:*

- Meeting objective was to develop a comprehensive dissemination and impact agenda for local officials
- Develop Democratic Governance themes which support *Inclusive Communities* agenda
  - Model some of the ideas fostered by the Institute for Local Government's Collaborative Governance Initiative
  - Include "beyond the usual" participants in all efforts
  - Comparison shop for right approach
  - If divisions exist, jointly develop a new process for decision-making

*City Futures Panel on Equity and Opportunity:*

It was my job to illuminate Democratic Governance themes that could be used to assist the Equity and Opportunity Panel in their discussion regarding *Building Inclusive Communities*. I shared strategies and strengths that could be implemented to cross economic, racial, and social barriers.

*Finance, Administration, & Intergovernmental Relations (FAIR) Policy Committee:*

About 50 of the 80 members of this committee were present. We separated into small groups to better discuss the thrust of NLC policy/advocacy in this area—where the emphasis could/should be, priorities, federal issues negatively impacting local government in the areas of interest to this committee. In the end, the following areas were of greatest concern:

- Tax policy
  - Potential non-deductibility of municipal bonds
  - Impact of the AMT and the deductibility of state and local taxes
  - The quintessential question of why tax and what?
  - The overall linkage between federal, state, and local taxes that ultimately results in a reduction to the lowest level of government resulting in insufficient funding for meeting expected needs
- Unfunded Mandates Reform Act
  - Federal officials need to hear more of the compelling local stories
    - Funding deficit stories
    - Preemptions of state and local authority (over ½ by CBO analysis)
  - Threshold of \$60 million is too high
  - Narrow the legislation not subject to UMRA
- Sales tax
  - Shortage of revenues
  - Internet sales
  - Maintain Dialogue

*FAIR Steering Committee:*

- Presentation by Ellen Marshall (consultant to state and local governments on Streamlined Sales and Use Tax Project [SSTP] since the agreement's inception) regarding the SSTP

- Oct. 1, 2005 voluntary collection agreement went into effect
- 13 states, including Michigan, are in full compliance
- 6 states are partially compliant
- Moving to totally electronic system with 200 existing and new retailers collecting
- 2-3 years from final action—possibility of Congressional or Supreme Court action to mandate collection is still unclear
- Current problem exacerbated by pending legislation which would require locals to streamline collection of telecom taxes for states to remain compliant
- New formal role for locals “State and Local Advisory Council”—12 members: 8 at large, 1 each from NLC, National Association of Counties, U.S. Conference of Mayors, Government Finance Officers Association
- Discussed work plan as delineated in Policy meeting
- Scheduled summer and fall meetings—no details

#### Leadership Training:

##### *Seminar on Effective Strategic Communications:*

The trainer was Marcelo Gaete-Tapia, Senior Director of Programs for NALEO Education Fund, Los Angeles CA. The workshop was helpful, particularly as most examples shed some light on dealing with the English-as-a-second-language population.

- Communication process
  - Objectives to persuade and inform
  - Strategy includes: Value, message, vehicle(s), discipline, calendar
- Other issues covered
  - Interview techniques
  - Determining newsworthiness of event
  - Bridging techniques

#### Conference activities:

*John Kasich*, Westerville OH, host of *Heartland with John Kasich*, was the opening speaker and the first to express a recurring theme. The former Senator talked about bipartisanship and division. He spoke about how the system appears to be permanently divided—and, therefore, broken. Compromise, keeping the needs of average folks constantly at the forefront, cooperation all seem to have fallen by the wayside and been replaced by some egocentric need of legislators to demonstrate an ability to single-handedly create—or halt—something. Kasich “waxed poetic” about his time in Washington when members on both sides of the aisle demonstrated citizenship and teamwork.

*Cable and Video franchising* workshop outlined the federal legislation that appears to be much like the Michigan legislation, but has since proven to be even more draconian for local interests. At the time of the conference there was not a specific bill or set of bills, only potential elements of legislation. The session had a panel of folks including a Senate aide, and Mike Bracy a Washington attorney heavily involved in lobbying on this issue, and Jeanine Kenney, senior policy analyst for Consumers Union. Without specifics, the discussion focused on the needs of locals: maintaining local control of ROW; continuing any revenues through current state or local contracts or legislation; retaining local ability to provide cable and video services; and equal treatment of all delivery systems. Of course, since the conference, the legislation has been revealed, and fast-tracked, and, if passed will eliminate our control of ROW, eliminate our ability to infuse community values into the video offerings, make the FCC—not locals—the place for consumers to complain about service, allows new providers to pick and choose to whom they will offer services, reduces revenue from our cable franchises and limits PEG revenue. Additionally, this federal legislation also negatively impacts our state Metro Act—further eroding revenue to local communities—the money we use for cablecasting public meetings, emergency and regular community announcements, subsidy to Community Media Network for service groups, hobbyists, and issue forums. Like the proposed Michigan legislation, there is no provision for reimbursement for physical repair and maintenance of our ROW after a private, for-profit company has dug it up.

*Senators Kent Conrad (D-ND) and Joseph Biden (D-DE)* spoke to the general assembly each touting their own priorities. Both were careful not to blame the Executive Branch of government for the stalemate and

divisiveness in Washington. However, like Kasich, neither offered a solution. It is always interesting to listen to such individuals first-hand—but, sometimes, not very memorable.

Although First Lady Laura Bush and Secretary for Homeland Security Michael Chertoff addressed the assembly, I did not hear them. That was the time *Senator Debbie Stabenow* could meet with us. I chose to use my time advocating for our local interests with someone who actually should be personally representing those interests. We talked about Community Development Block Grants (CDBG), which are again scheduled for reduction, the budget and not balancing it “on the backs” of local communities, as well as the cable and video franchise issue, and Canadian trash, of course. Sen. Stabenow seemed receptive and her staff was helpful. This was particularly true for those of us who met with her outside of the “MML delegation” setting.

With Henrietta Davis of Cambridge MA, I led a workshop on implementing Democratic Governance techniques. We used a small group participation format that allowed us to showcase a variety of issues, vehicles, and outcomes. Such efforts continue to add to our ability to find a level of effective civic engagement that leads to long-term, supported local decisions.

*David Gergen*, Editor-at-Large for *U.S. News & World Report* and Director of the Center for Public Leadership at the JFK School of Government at Harvard was the closing general session speaker. Gergen revealed a personal belief that folks in Washington have no direct relationship to the folks that are affected by the laws passed there. He also reinforced the position that programs like CDBG assist local governments in doing their job. The bulk of Gergen's remarks focused on the changing issues of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There is a rising competitive challenge from Asia. US healthcare is currently 16% of the GDP. Some studies show our standard of living dropping by 40% over the next generation. Education is critical, but current high school training is obsolete—need more science, math, technology, engineering training. We have extensive financial imbalances—budget, trade, debt; US is broke and facing the retirement of baby boomers within five years. The hope lies in the rise of “social entrepreneurs” who are part of programs such as “Teach for America.” Social service is a growing vocation by both necessity and desire. Gergen stressed new processes and priorities for the future, more social capital and less politics.

All in all, it was an enlightening experience. I was proud to share our Troy successes with others. I learned a few things as well and have shared those with staff. Again, thank you to Council for approving the expenditure and the citizens of Troy for allowing the privilege.

R.E.B.