



NACO'S 80TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE AND EXPOSITION

MECKLENBURG COUNTY / CHARLOTTE, NORTH CAROLINA / JULY 10-13, 2015

By MCCA Executive Director, Rosemary Kulow



This year's annual National Association of Counties (NACo) conference was held in beautiful Charlotte, North Carolina July 10-13. Many educational opportunities and business meetings were available concerning any number of important issues facing American counties. Numerous steering committees and their subcommittees met throughout the conference to develop policy positions for consideration by the NACo Board of Directors and the convention body as a whole. NACo has the following steering committees: Agriculture and Rural Affairs; Community, Economic & Workforce Development; Environment, Energy, and Land Use; Finance, Pensions & Intergovernmental Affairs; Health; Human Services & Education; Justice & Public Safety; Public Lands; Telecommunications & Technology; and Transportation.

I serve on the **Agriculture & Rural Affairs Steering Committee**, and at this year's meeting held Saturday morning we discussed how the U.S. Dept. of Commerce's Economic Development Administration investment policy is designed to establish a foundation for sustainable job growth and build strong regional economies. We also heard a very interesting presentation about how Churchill County, Nevada, home to Naval Air Station Fallon, the Navy's premier tactical air warfare training center, works with the Naval Air Station to guide growth and development to insure that lands around NAS Fallon remain compatible with the installation's training mission. This is primarily accomplished through the protection of local and historic ranchland.

Later in the meeting we discussed the use of agricultural biotechnology, which has been around for many years. Traditionally, biotechnology included simple cross-breeding techniques, which alter living organisms, or parts of organisms, to make or modify products. Today, this technology includes the development of microorganisms designed to improve plants or animals for specific agricultural uses. The dynamics surrounding genetic engineering have grown

exponentially in recent years with the increasing popularity of organic and “non-GMO” farming. During the session, a panel of county officials discussed their involvement with the technology within the context of their role as county commissioners. Later in the Steering Committee meeting, the committee voted to support the promotion of labeling of GMO food. NACo’s adopted position is that *“NACo urges Congress to support country-of-origin labeling (COOL) provisions in any agricultural authorizing or appropriation bills. NACo strongly urges the federal government to encourage that all fruits, vegetables, meats and other foodstuffs entering the United States be legibly and indelibly labeled in such manner as to indicate to the consumer the country of origin.”*

NACo voted to support a GIPSA ruling that ensures a fair, competitive market for all grain and livestock producers. NACo also supports a comprehensive plan to address the co-habitation of genetically engineered and non-genetically engineered crops to provide a strong and robust agriculturally-based economy. Furthermore, NACo supports policies provided by the U.S. Department of Agriculture that standardize or unify regulation of genetically engineered crops which alleviate the need for county or municipal governing bodies to regulate, investigate or enforce regulation of related ordinances or laws.

On Saturday, I also attended a state association Meeting Planners Roundtable Discussion, at which time we talked about best practices for planning for and hosting conferences for state associations of counties. Good ideas and information were shared at this roundtable. This meeting was followed by lunch in the Exhibitors’ hall, then a peer roundtable discussion about infrastructure financing possibilities for counties. With an ever-growing need to build, replace, and/or maintain infrastructure at the same time residents are calling for fiscal restraint, counties are challenged to develop innovative public finance strategies. We heard about successful projects that were achieved due to the financial strategies that were deployed, as well as lessons learned from not so successful projects.

The Opening General Session held later Saturday afternoon was presided over by outgoing NACo President, the Honorable Riki Hokama, with featured speakers, Jerry Abramson, Deputy Assistant to the President in White House Intergovernmental Affairs and the Honorable Ashton Carter, U. S. Secretary of Defense.

Sunday began with a workshop about Criminal Justice Coordinating Councils, but then I had to move quickly over to advanced leadership training on Building Effective Working Relationships, - a continuing education course offered by my professional association, the National Council of County Association Executives (NCCAE). This course provides credits toward State Association Executives’ certification.

The afternoon began with a packed meeting of the Immigration Reform Task Force, which was extremely interesting. Folks in this meeting shared their experiences of developing and working with immigration policies for their counties and cities. They stressed how

important it was to get elected officials to get on board with an immigration task force and to stress the importance of the business factor. When making presentations to the citizenry, the use of statistics and analyses can demonstrate clearly how immigrants positively affect the economy by providing successful new local businesses and qualified personnel to add to the labor pool. This is especially beneficial in areas where population is diminishing. The meeting of the Immigration Reform Task Force was immediately followed by the annual conference's business meeting of my fellow state association executives.

Monday morning began bright and early at 8:15 with another NCCAE continuing education session on meeting planning, which was followed by the full meeting of the NACo convention, including the election of officers. This meeting is the culmination of the convention's business because at this meeting all the resolutions developed and adopted by the steering committees are considered and voted on. Added excitement is provided by the election of NACo officers, which is conducted in a format similar to a political party's convention.

The Northeast Region Caucus, which provides Maine and other northeastern states the chance to discuss regional issues and stay connected with the NACo Board of Directors through its elected board member, met after the NACo meeting this year. The Northeast Region also meets on a monthly conference call. These meetings provide an opportunity for NACo updates about legislative activity and a time to discuss regional issues northeast states have in common.

The closing general session was held Monday afternoon, at which time the U.S. Secretary of Transportation and Journalist, Soledad O'Brien, spoke to the assembly. The general session was spearheaded by newly elected NACo President, the Honorable Sally Clark. President Clark's administration will focus on investment in humanity and community.

The convention concluded with a conference celebration, which began at the NASCAR Hall of Fame located next door to the convention center. Folks moved over to the ballroom for dinner served at stations around the hall and a dance with music provided by an excellent live band. All in all, Mecklenburg County's hosting of the annual NACo conference was a huge success and very enjoyable and enlightening. I recommend that every county official who is serious about doing their best for their constituents attend at least one NACo conference, if at all possible. It's amazing what can be learned from these gatherings and how beneficial the new relationships forged can be for us and our counties.