NACo eForum offers insight to local leaders’ thinking about national issues

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Strong support for expanding Medicaid, infrastructure investment and preserving the tax-exempt status of municipal bonds were among the key findings of a National Association of Counties (NACo) “eForum” involving 80 members of the NACo Board of Directors.

The live polling session, held Dec. 8, 2012, explored local perspectives on national politics and elections, county fiscal conditions, public pensions, health, immigration, economic development and natural disasters. A report summarizing the findings is now available.

“The purpose of the eForum was to take a snapshot of the NACo Board of Directors’ insights and opinions on important issues of the day – topics ranging from politics and elections to county fiscal conditions and public pensions to health, immigration, economic development and natural disasters,” said NACo Executive Director Matt Chase. “These leaders in county government bring a unique perspective to a variety of national issues affecting counties and communities.”

The report’s key findings include:

There is strong support for federal Medicaid expansion among county officials.
Seventy percent of participants said their state should participate in Medicaid expansion under the Affordable Care Act. The support was consistent across geographic regions and across urban, suburban, and rural counties. Counties provide the health care safety net and, through public hospitals, clinics and nursing homes, bear the costs associated with uninsured patients.

Infrastructure investment is essential to growing local economies.
Participants said enhanced infrastructure investment would best improve the local economy, along with a better trained workforce and a clearer economic development vision for their region. Seventy-two percent said they support increasing the federal gas tax to boost the Highway Trust Fund. Moreover, as the economy improves and local revenues increase, counties give high priority to new local investments in infrastructure, business development and workforce development.

Tax-exempt municipal bonds are an important tool for community investment.
Seventy-eight percent of participants support maintaining the tax-exempt status of municipal bonds. Tax-exempt municipal bonds are a key federal-state-local partnership: state and local governments build and maintain 75 percent of our nation’s infrastructure, with a majority financed through tax-exempt bonds. In addition, 63 percent of participants want to keep the federal tax deduction for local property taxes.
Counties absorb costs associated with our broken immigration system. Participants said counties spend significant resources for undocumented immigrants on health care, social services and public safety. Forty-four percent have experienced an increase in demand for services from undocumented immigrants during the recession; 26 percent said immigrants have left their communities due to lack of jobs. A path to citizenship, establishment of a temporary worker program, simplified immigration processes, and enhanced border enforcement are key to immigration reform, they said.

Managing the local jail population is an ongoing challenge for counties. Almost half (48 percent) of participants operated a county jail at or above capacity during the fall of 2012. Nonetheless, 47 percent report that their state has an initiative to reduce prison populations that results in shifting prisoners to county jails or community corrections, placing additional burdens on the county justice system. Counties continue to implement local programs designed to increase public safety, decrease costs, and reduce recidivism. Such “smart justice” programs include mental health diversion, pre-trial programming, re-entry support, and supportive housing.

The “new normal” of natural disasters is having widespread impact on counties. Seven in 10 participants were in counties that received a Major Disaster Declaration over the last five years (2008-2012). Counties experienced hurricanes, wildfire, flooding, snowstorms, tornadoes and drought. Participants reinforced the importance of disaster aid for response and recovery as an essential role of the federal government.

Many state-level policies are negatively affecting counties. Sixty-five percent of participants said state policies and programs have had a negative impact on their county over the past four years, while 52 percent said federal policies and programs have had a positive impact. Among other policy challenges, reductions in state funding are the most common source of counties’ current revenue shortfalls.

The politics of county officials mirror the nation and reflect NACo’s bipartisan nature. Participants were almost equally divided between Democrats (49 percent) and Republicans (46 percent), with five percent identifying themselves as Independents. Fifty-four percent voted for Barack Obama in 2012; 55 percent in 2008. County officials approach serving the people in their communities – from filling potholes to maintaining parks and providing law enforcement – in a non-partisan manner.

All of the findings are available in the report which is posted on the NACo website.

The NACo Board of Directors supervise, manage and control the business and property of the association; determine NACo’s mission as identified by the members; monitor NACo’s success in fulfilling its mission; and ensures that NACo will be able to continue to fulfill its mission.

The nation’s 3,069 county governments provide the essential building blocks to create healthy, vibrant, and safe communities. Counties support and maintain public infrastructure, transportation, and economic development assets; create and sustain a skilled workforce; ensure public health and public safety to protect our citizens; and implement a broad portfolio of federal, state, and local programs in a cost-effective and accountable manner.

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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 3,069 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](http://www.naco.org).