County Priorities Part of President's State of the Union Address

Transportation, infrastructure, economic issues cited

WASHINGTON, D.C. – America’s county officials were encouraged by some issues President Obama raised in his State of the Union including transportation and water infrastructure, economic development, healthcare and immigration reform.

“NACo was pleased to hear President Obama mention county government priority issues such as transportation funding and economic development as part of his ‘Year of Action’ plan to help our county economies grow,” said NACo President Linda Langston, supervisor, Linn County, Iowa. “Counties provide essential services to create healthy, safe, vibrant and economically resilient communities and we can better meet the needs and expectations of the American people working closely with our federal partners as the president pledged during his State of the Union Speech.”

Of particular interest to counties is transportation infrastructure funding. Counties play a critical role in our nation’s infrastructure, investing more than $106 billion each year in public works infrastructure. Counties own 45 percent of America’s roadways and 228,000 bridges, and are involved in the funding and ownership of nearly one-third of airports and around 30 percent of transit systems.

Specifically, the president called on Congress to pass a new surface transportation law for federal highway, transit and safety programs and the Water Resources Development Act, both NACo priorities.

“NACo supports the president’s priority to address the nation’s growing infrastructure deficit,” said NACo First Vice President Riki Hokama, council member, Maui County, Hawaii. “The president understands and counties agree that failure to make smart and increased investments today will cost counties more money in the future.”
Workforce issues, long-term unemployment and economic development were other county priority issues mentioned in the president’s speech. Counties invest more than $25 billion on economic development each year. This investment is especially vital as counties across the country continue to recover from the recession. In 2013 only 54 county economies, mostly in the Midwest, reached their pre-recession levels of unemployment.

“NACo supports further investment in economic development and agrees that we must invest in a skilled workforce development system to meet the needs of business and reduce the nation’s unemployment rate,” said NACo Second Vice President Sallie Clark, commissioner, El Paso County, Colo.

Delivery of health care services to the American people is an essential function of county government. In addition counties and county officials have been key players in the implementation of the Affordable Care Act. Counties invest $70 billion annually in health services, supporting 960 hospitals and 1,550 local health departments.

“NACo agrees that we must work together to find ways to increase access to health insurance coverage and quality care,” said NACo Health Steering Committee Chair Larry Johnson, commissioner, DeKalb County, Ga.

Immigration reform, a long-stalled issue on Capitol Hill, is another county priority issue because of the effects the current system has on county services and taxpayers. Counties are required by law to provide emergency health, free elementary and secondary education, and public safety to all residents, regardless of immigration status. Comprehensive immigration reform is one of NACo’s legislative priorities for 2014.

Matt Chase, NACo’s executive director, said the national legislative and policy agenda affecting counties and communities is complex, challenging and full, but that county leaders stand ready to work with federal partners to deliver for the American people.

“Most of the key domestic issues raised by the president tonight have a direct impact on our nation's county governments,” Chase said. “This is why NACo and county elected leaders from across the nation remain committed to strengthening our intergovernmental system of federal, state and local governments. County governments play a key role in developing and funding core community building blocks like health, justice, public safety, transportation and community development services.”

More information about Why Counties Matter is available on the NACo website or by contacting Jim Philipps at 202.942.4220.

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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 assists America’s 3,069 counties in pursuing excellence in public service to produce healthy, vibrant, safe and resilient counties. NACo promotes sound public policies, fosters county solutions and innovation, promotes intergovernmental and public-private collaboration and provides value-added services to save counties and taxpayers money. More information at: www.naco.org.