House OKs delay for compliance with costly withholding mandate

By Alyson McLoughlin
ASSOCIATE LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR

Due to a full-court press from county, city, state officials and private sector groups, a majority in the House of Representatives has now cosponsored H.R. 1023, a bill that would repeal Section 511 of the Tax Increase Prevention and Reconciliation Act (TIPRA).

Repeal of this burdensome tax provision, a key legislative priority for NACo, moved one step closer Oct. 10 when a bill passed the House that includes a one-year delay in the deadline for counties to comply.

A $7 billion shell game

Section 511, quietly inserted as a revenue raiser after the act had passed both the House and Senate last year, would impose an unfunded mandate on counties and create such significant compliance headaches that the Treasury Department has publicly struggled to write rules for implementation.

It would require counties that spend more than $100 million per year on goods and services, as well as every state and the federal government, to withhold federal income taxes on vendor payments beginning Jan. 1, 2011.

There is no minimum transaction amount; even a county employee who purchases a $10 screwdriver at a hardware store using a county procurement card would be required to pay the retailer $9.70 and send the remaining 30 cents to the Internal Revenue Service.

The county would have to issue the hardware store a 1099 or similar documentation at the end of every year.

Section 511 of TIPRA also imposes a significant costs burden on vendors, many of whom have...
House gives Internet tax moratorium one-year extension


In 1998, Congress imposed its first Internet tax moratorium, followed by extensions in 2001 and 2004. Along the way, there have been several bills introduced in Congress that would have extended the moratorium permanently.

The bill passed by the House, which NACo supported, has three important features: It is clear, it is flexible and it does no harm. It’s important features: It is clear, it is flexible and it does no harm. It’s.

The Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee attempted to mark up a bipartisan companion bill to H.R. 3678 — S. 1453 — but was unable to agree on a number of provisions, so it was pulled from consideration.

Wyden has suggested he may use his position on the Senate Finance Committee to move his permanent bill, but it too would require unanimous consent for floor consideration. The Senate can take up H.R. 3678 when it is received from the House. Most senators have voiced support for an extension of the moratorium.

2008 Presidential Election Project gains momentum

Biden, Edwards will speak at ISAC fall meeting

With the first primary and caucus dates just two months away, NACo’s 2008 Presidential Election Project is gaining momentum, with candidates committing to participate in forums and meetings being held with campaign directors.

Sen. Joe Biden (D-Del.) and former North Carolina senator John Edwards (D) have confirmed their participation in the Iowa State Association of Counties (ISAC) fall meeting in Des Moines on Nov. 28 and 29.

NACo is working with ISAC to get all the candidates to attend the meeting and have them present their proposals on county issues. NACo is also assisting the New Hampshire Association of Counties with a similar event on Nov. 4.

The forums are among a number of activities on which the Election Project is focusing.

NACo Executive Director Larry Naake and Legislative Affairs Director Ed Rosado have been traveling to different parts of the country working with the policy staff from the presidential campaigns.

They have met with representatives from the campaigns of Democrats Clinton, Edwards and Obama, and Republicans Giuliani, McCain and Romney.

These meetings serve as more than a chance to educate the candidates on county issues. They are an opportunity to get to know the staff and begin a working relationship toward restoring the federal-county partnership.

NACo encourages the campaigns to use the association as a resource offering the same help to all candidates — research, demographic data, background on county issues and connections to county members to discuss how their policies would affect county governments.

County officials are also actively participating in the Election Project. More than 700 have participated in campaign events and 375 have endorsed a candidate for president. The complete list can be seen at: www.naco.org/blog.

If you would like to share who you are supporting, log on to the presidential preference survey at: www.naco.org/presidential. All of the results will be posted on the blog.

(For more information on the project, please contact Kim Rogers at krogers@naco.org.)

Conferees need to reconcile differences between Senate, House versions

There are several possible scenarios for final passage. First, Congress could override the expected veto. Second, there could be more short-term continuing resolutions or even one for the remainder of the fiscal year.

Third, this bill could become the vehicle for an omnibus appropriations bill, which would combine several of the funding bills — the norm for Congress over the past several years.

The last time all of the appropriations bills were approved individually was in 1998. The bill as passed has no major changes to most programs that are of interest to counties. The one significant change is an increase of $10 million to several programs under the Older Americans Act.

As a result, the Senate bill has more funding than the House for the National Caregiver Support Program and Senior Nutrition Programs, but is still shy of the House numbers for Supportive Centers and Senior Centers.

The breakdown is as follows: National Caregiver Support Program: $159 million Senate, $156 million House and FY 2007, $154 million president’s request.

Senior Nutrition Programs: $775 million Senate, $758 million House, $735 million FY 2007 and $711 million president’s request.

Supportive Services and Senior Centers: $355 million Senate, $357 House, $350 million FY 2007 and president’s request.

Although the increases are not as high as some would have wanted, many of these programs were flat-funded for years.

Unresolved issues: workforce resiscion

In addition to the Older Americans Act funding, conferees will have several issues to reconcile.

One of the major issues for counties is that the House bill includes a rescission of $335 million from FY07 Workforce Investment Act funds to pay for an increase in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The Senate bill does not have this provision.

Both bills include the current funding for workforce development programs: $864 million for Adult Training, $940 million for Youth Training and $1.47 billion for Dislocated Workers.

The president had proposed significant cuts in all of these programs: $712 million for Adult Training, $840.5 million for Youth Training and $1.1 billion for Dislocated Workers.

Additionally, the Senate once again included language that would prohibit the Department of Labor from making substantial changes to the local governance structure of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) through the regulatory process. The department has tried to circumvent current law in the past and take away authority from local WIA boards through administrative action, which NACo has strongly opposed.

AIDS funding

One of the most contentious health issues in conference could be AIDS funding. The House bill redistributes funds among the different titles to provide more to the 10 communities with more AIDS cases, with a considerable increase for San Francisco. Meanwhile, the Senate approved an amendment offered by Sen. Michael Enzi (R-Wyo.) that would strike the House redistricting. And upping the contention quotient: Both bills have different funding levels for the programs: more than $2.23 billion in the House and more than $2.17 billion in the Senate. Current funding comes in at $2.13 billion and the president’s FY08 request at $2.15 billion.

Other health program funding differences include:

Community Health Centers: $2.1 billion in the House, $2.2 billion in the Senate, just under $2 billion in current funding and the president’s request.

Mental Health Grants: $905 million in the House, $923 million in the Senate, $883 million in FY07 and $807 million in the president’s request.

Substance Abuse Treatment Grants: $2.19 billion in the House, $2.18 billion in the Senate, $2.15 billion in FY07 and $2.11 billion in the president’s request.

Human Services

One of the most contentious issues in human services is Low-Income Home Energy Assistance (LI-HEAP). LIHEAP funding is $2.6 billion in the House, nearly $2.2 billion in the Senate (the same as FY07 funding) and $1.8 billion in the president’s request.

Both bills once again rejected the elimination of the Community Services Block Grant, with the House providing more than $660 million and the Senate more than $670 million, an increase of $30 million and $40 million from FY07.

In education, there are differences in funding for Title I Elementary and Secondary Education and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The House has higher levels than the Senate for Title I ($14.3 billion and $13.9 billion, respectively) and the Senate has higher levels than the House for IDEA ($11.2 billion and $10.9 billion, respectively).

The Senate has already appointed its conference: Democratic Sens. Tom Harkin (Iowa), Daniel Inouye (Hawaii), Herb Kohl (Wis.), Patty Murray (Wash.), Mary Landrieu (La.), Richard Durbin (Ill.), Harry Reed (Nev.), Frank Lautenberg (N.J.) and Robert Byrd (W.Va.), and Republicans Arlen Specter (Pa.), Thad Cochran (Miss.), Judd Gregg (N.H.), Larry Craig (Idaho), Kay Bailey Hutchison (Texas), Ted Stevens (Alaska), Richard Shelby (Ala.) and Pete Domenici (N.M.).
Large Urban County Caucus selects new priorities

BY DALEN A. HARRIS
ASSOCIATE LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR

Each year, NACo’s Large Urban County Caucus (LUCC) leadership meets in a member county and deliberates on the emerging issues that affect metropolitan counties.

With such a wide range of legislative issues, the difficulty lies not in coming up with ideas for projects, but in narrowing the list down to substantive areas where LUCC can focus on national policy that impacts the majority of urban counties.

Recently, the LUCC Steering Committee convened in Tarrant County, Texas (Fort Worth) for the group’s 2007 annual planning retreat. After two days of extensive discussion and presentations, the LUCC leadership selected five key focus areas for 2007-2008. They are:

Building Urban Communities
• Financing water and transportation infrastructure, including mass transit, bridges and roads;

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Securing passage of H.R. 1023 will be very difficult as federal “pay as you go”—often termed “paygo”—rules require Congress to come up with $6 billion in offsetting revenues to pay for the first year of repeal.

One-year delay offers hope of repeal
The powerful chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, Rep. Charlie Rangel (D-N.Y.), reached out to NACo and coalition members several months ago by offering a one-year delay of Section 511 as part of his own legislation to halt outsourcing of debt collection by the Internal Revenue Service (H.R. 3056, the Tax Collection Responsibility Act). It is this bill that passed the House on Oct. 10.

House passage sets the stage for the Senate to consider H.R. 3056 or a House-Senate conference to include its provisions in a tax bill before Congress adjourns for the year.

As the deadline approaches, many counties are increasingly nervous about having to begin their efforts to comply.

In addition to delaying the effective date until Jan. 1, 2012, H.R. 3056 requires the U.S. Department of the Treasury to assess and report on the compliance costs for federal agencies; that report will presumably help make the case that compliance with Section 511 will cost more than it will bring in to the federal government. And it gives Congress more time to develop broader legislation to address problems with tax compliance by federal contractors and/or to include repeal in other tax legislation.

Meek applauds NACo support; Herger protests lack of full repeal
In a press statement released the day of the House vote on H.R. 3056, Rep. Kendrick Meek (D-Fla.), the lead sponsor of the bill to repeal Section 511 of TIPRA, applauded NACo’s leadership on the issue. Meek said, “[t]he private sector Government Withholding Relief Coalition and public sector entities like the National Association of Counties have played an integral part in this process. Today’s victory is in large part due to their grassroots lobbying effort.”

Rep. Wally Herger (R-Calif.), the lead Republican sponsor of H.R. 1023, also lauded the inclusion of a one-year delay in H.R. 3056 as a “breakthrough.” However, as he noted in a floor statement on the legislation when it was considered, the bill “merely delays 3 percent withholding implementation for one year, but that does not solve this real and pressing problem. What Congress should do is follow the broader proposal my friend Kendrick Meek of Florida and I have introduced, repealing withholding outright.”

NACo is urging county officials to keep asking their members of Congress to cosponsor and seek a vote on H.R. 1023.

Cost of compliance would exceed collected revenue

TIPRA from page 1

indicated that they would pass the cost along to the county.

Since the requirement only applies to public sector transactions, it also creates a disincentive for many vendors to do business with counties and states.

In fact, the costs of compliance for counties, cities, states and vendors would almost certainly exceed the revenue that the federal government would expect to collect. The Joint Committee on Taxation estimates that Congress will only gain $20 million – $250 million per year once Section 511 is implemented.

However, federal accounting rules credit this discrepancy with bringing more than $6 billion into the federal treasury in the first year.

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Finance officers challenge accounting standards board

By Jacqueline Byers
Director of Research

In late 2006, the Executive Board of the Government Finance Officers Association of America (GFOA) voted to reassess the role of the Governmental Accounting Standards Board (GASB). GASB was organized in 1984 to establish financial accounting and reporting standards for state and local governments. Its standards guide the preparation of external financial reports of those entities.

Joining GFOA in the move were the seven major state and local government organizations, including NACo.

The move by GFOA, the largest association representing state and local government financial officers, appears to have been prompted by “frustration at a seemingly endless list of projects that appears destined more to complicate financial reporting than to provide additional information of real value to decision makers,” according to a statement on GFOA’s Web site.

The mounting frustration was kindled by a series of GASB initiatives, starting in 1999. In that year, GASB issued Statement 34, which set out new reporting requirements for governments to account for infrastructure investments and accounting in their annual financial statements.

Further, in August 2004, GASB implemented Statement 45, which required governments to provide more information about post-employment benefits for retirees in their financial statements.

And finally in April of this year, GASB announced its intention to develop another set of guidelines that moved beyond its traditional focus on accounting and onto performance measurements.

GASB says the Service Efforts and Accomplishments (SEA) Reporting guidelines would help local residents and elected officials determine how well local governments are meeting their public policy missions.

SEA was implemented even after GASB’s Advisory Council expressed its concern about the proposed program. Advisory Council members, representing the major state and local government groups, are frustrated by the continuing list of GASB statements and programs, which they believe complicate and increase the cost of financial reporting without providing any additional information or resources of real value to people who make the financial decisions for governments.

The national public interest groups are also worried about the impact of performance measuring guidelines and economic-condition reporting that are on the horizon.

GFOA sees these new guidelines as a sign that GASB, in its more than 20 years, has completed the tasks for which it was created and is now obsolete as a standard-setting agency.

An alternative proposed by GFOA would be to have the Financial Accounting Standards Board (FASB), which has long overseen the financial standards of businesses and nonprofits, replace GASB as the overseer for governmental accounting.

If FASB were to replace GASB, would governmental accounting suffer? According to GFOA’s reasoning the answer is “no.” Past history shows that FASB has had to respond rapidly to newly emerging business types, such as cable television, real estate and computer software, among many others, with practical guidance for accounting and financial management.

And because of the demand for its advice, there is less danger of FASB getting into what is called “supply-driven” standard setting similar to what GFOA has been accused of.

A second, and probably the most practical advantage, is the elimination of different and often meaningless, accounting standards for governments and the private sector.

A third benefit is the strength and variety of individuals on the Financial Accounting Standards Advisory Council, who are active and engaged, and play a bigger role in the decision making at FASB than the similar Advisory Council has been able to do at GASB.

GFOA believes that the independence and autonomy of FASB would be at least similar to that enjoyed by GASB. In fact, many at GFOA believe that independence would be increased by having state and local governments under FASB, rather than an organization devoted only to governmental accounting.

Even as GFOA presents its position on the future of GASB, it continues to fund and work with GASB. Through its partnerships with the seven major public interest groups and other national organizations that represent the financial communities, and by working with the Financial Accounting Foundation, which founded both boards, GFOA hopes that it will create a valuable conversation, and possibly a reevaluation, of what the future of governmental accounting standards should be.

Profiles in Service

Steve Garten
Commission Chairman
Barber County, Kan.
NACo Board of Directors

Number of years active in NACo: 7
Years in public service: 29
Occupation: retired U.S. Air Force/Veterinarian
Education: Kansas State University, doctor of veterinary medicine (1973)
The hardest thing I've ever done: is cope with the death of my dad in December 2006.
Three people (living or dead) I'd invite to dinner: Jesus, Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan.
A dream I have is to: develop a wholesale water district for our nine-county (six in Kansas and three in Oklahoma) region with a large lake just north of our county seat, Medicine Lodge.
You'd be surprised to learn that: as a U.S. Air Force captain, I once pulled rank on a one-star general (wing commander).
The most adventurous thing I've ever done is: spend 10 days traveling in the USSR during the Cold War.
My favorite way to relax is: bass fish in one of our family's farm ponds.
I'm most proud of: my wife Bev, our children and grandchildren.
Every morning I read: The Wichita Eagle.
My favorite meal is: a good steak, creamed asparagus and hot blueberry pie à la mode.
My pet peeve is: anyone, young or old, who lies.
My motto is: “Try to always do what is right.”
The last book I read was: The Race to the Dan: The Retreat that Rescued the American Revolution by Larry G. Aaron.
My favorite movie is: Dr. Zhivago.
My favorite music is: country western and '60s rock.
My favorite president is: Ronald Reagan.

Why is this conflict of concern to county officials?

First and foremost, the guidelines, statements and regulations implemented by GASB govern how counties must maintain their financial records and prepare their annual financial reports. Auditors all across the county who perform county audits must comply with these rules so that the audits will be accepted by states and the federal government. These audits will determine if the county is in compliance with the requirements of many state and federal funding programs.

In addition, the comprehensive annual financial report of a county is the primary instrument used to determine the financial stability of a county by banks, bonding agencies and others, who may deny much-needed funding for a less than stellar report.

Finally, the more complicated the rules become, the more it costs to comply. Many county officials were required to hire outside consultants to help determine the value of their assets and infrastructure in order to comply with Statement 34.

Many counties will soon be trying to decide how they will fund and report the cost of health benefits for retirees and will be using special consultants to assist with compliance with this new rule.

Many auditors need to attend classes and special training in order to stay abreast of changing rules and standards. This ongoing training translates into higher costs for counties who hire these specially trained auditors.

(To view GFOA’s Web site — www.gfoa.org — to learn more.)

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Friendship sparks creative way to educate youth on 9-1-1

By Matthew Fellows
EDITORIAL ASSISTANT

Break out your box of Crayolas, because it's time to learn about safety. Using a long-time friendship as inspiration, Pinellas County, Fla. Public Education Coordinator Lori Buck features Blaine County, Mont. Commissioner Vic Miller in her latest project, a coloring book informing children that “Emergencies happen and they are not fun. You must learn when to call 9-1-1.”

This book teaches children how to call for help from a cell phone, what types of situations are appropriate and inappropriate for dialing 911, and that law enforcement agents and emergency workers are friendly and there to help.

Buck thought to use Miller when she imagined what he was like as a kid — “The coloring book features illustrations of Vic as I perceived him as a child—slightly mischievous and kind of klutzy,” she told the Blaine County Journal News. She added, “He has a youthful exuberance and curious quality to him that has made him a lifelong friend and someone who deeply cares about community education.”

With its cute, quirky drawings informing children that when in serious trouble, “in the end, all you have to do is call 9-1-1,” the book educates children and sends a positive message to parents as well. Miller said, “It truly is a great educational piece in that it is written in such a way that parents or adults must actually interact with the children. For that reason, it is truly a great piece of work.” He was flattered at being featured in the book, telling The Great Falls Tribune, “I think it’s wonderful. I hope we’ll get some of them in Montana so kids can color my head here.”

The coloring book is Buck’s first accomplishment with children’s books, but not her first collaboration with Miller, whom she first met while Miller was a student at the National Fire Academy in Emmitsburg, Md. over a decade ago. “He’s the perfect public servant,” Buck said of Miller, “and focused on what’s good for the community. I wish there were more people out there like him.”

Buck has collaborated with Miller on nearly every one of her writing projects, including several public communication guides and more than 150 articles. “He is a good resource and a helpful writer, and it’s not often that one can create such a strong professional relationship,” Buck said.

The inspiration to use Miller for the coloring book came from a desire of Buck to say thanks for being such a good public servant. “It’s a funny way to give credit [to Miller] for being there for both me and my community by providing excellent guidance….”

Written by Buck and Carrie Mahoney, the book is intended for children aged seven and younger, the book is available through Buck at 727/464-3858 or ed911@aol.com. You can also view and download a copy of the coloring book online at: www.pinellascounty.org/911/ColorForms.htm.

Changes in SCHIP don’t persuade Republican opponents to change votes

SCHIP from page 1

They added provisions designed to limit enrollment to children from families earning below 300 percent of the federal poverty level, to prevent enrolling illegal immigrant children, to create incentives for states to enroll children in Medicaid and to discourage families from dropping private insurance in favor of SCHIP.

The changes were not enough to win over any additional Republican votes. The Senate is expected to take up the measure by the end of next week, but the White House has again promised a veto.

With the short-term continuing resolution, which extended SCHIP past the Sept. 30 end of the fiscal year, expiring in mid-November some observers are speculating that a longer-term extension may be in the cards, putting political pressure on Republicans closer to the upcoming elections.

In its first effort to pass SCHIP legislation, the House fell 13 votes short of the two-thirds majority needed to override the president’s veto. The Oct. 18 vote was 273-156.

Two-hundred and twenty-nine Democrats and 44 Republicans voted to override the veto, while 156 Democrats and 154 Republicans voted to sustain it. Six Democrats who had voted against the bill, initially, changed their minds and voted to override.

None of the Republicans targeted by SCHIP advocates with a hard-hitting advertising campaign voted to override the veto.

The bill would have added $35 billion to the program over the next five years to a total of $60 billion, enough to cover 10 million uninsured children. The increased funding levels would have been paid for by an increase in the federal cigarette tax to $1 per pack.

NACo supports legislation to reauthorize SCHIP that would increase annual funding levels, provide maximum flexibility to states and counties in expanding coverage to needy populations, and assure that no state receives less than it currently does under the current formula.

NACo supports credentialing county GIS professionals

By Pinco Flores
GIS OUTREACH DIRECTOR

NACo has joined an effort by the GIS Certification Institute (GISCI) to formally credential GIS professionals.

In a letter of support to the GISCI, Randy Johnson, chair, NACo GIS Committee and Hennepin County, Minn. commissioner, wrote: “We believe that your work strengthens the various professions within the GIS industry by promoting a strict adherence to the standards for GIS professionals, and encouraging long term professional development.”

Counties have long hired GIS professionals and have invested for years in training staff in GIS technology, but in recent years, there has been a virtual boom in the industry — not just among all levels of government, but also in the private and educational sectors.

Scott Grams, GISCI executive director, said, “as a result, employees are having a more difficult time discerning between an applicant with an extensive background in GIS and those with only a basic understanding.”

GISCI certified the first group of GIS professionals in October 2003. Since then, the institute has certified more than 1,700 GIS professionals, 20 percent of whom work in county governments.

The GISCI program is a voluntary portfolio-based system that does not require an examination, as it is very difficult to design a single GIS examination that can fairly evaluate the variety of skills needed for the various specialties.

The GISCI portfolio system ensures that its methods capture and endorse the skills necessary for GIS practice by demanding competency in education, professional experience and contributions to the profession.

There is also a temporary grandfathering provision built in for candidates whose experience predates many existing GIS jobs; it expires in January 2009. Eligible candidates for this provision are judged on their experience only, and their credential will not differ from a standard certification.

In addition to having to demonstrate competency, certification requires adherence to a code of ethics that helps GIS professionals make appropriate and ethical choices by outlining specific rules of conduct. The rules of conduct list specific behaviors and actions that are prohibited and provide a basis for evaluating work from an ethical standpoint.

For county staff interested to learn more about becoming a certified GIS professional, the full description of the program and application requirements may be found at www.gisci.org.

“Having a reputable certification body helps to better identify the professionals with the necessary breadth of education and experience,” Grams said. “GIS practitioners who have the requisite experience, education and contributions can look to GISCI certification as another level of credibility.”

“Ultimately, applicants, not certifications, get the jobs, but being a certified GIS professional shows an employer that GIS is central to one’s professional expertise.”

Letters to the Editor

Do you have a compliment, complaint or different point of view? Let us know.

Please include a phone number with your letter. Mail, fax or e-mail to: County News, NACo, 25 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., Washington, DC 20001; 202/393-2630; cnews@naco.org.

NACo News invites
Cuyahoga Treasurer Jim Rokakis shines in national spotlight

By CHARLES TAYLOR
SENIOR STAFF WRITER

Cuyahoga County, Ohio Treasurer Jim Rokakis had no idea what to expect when The Washington Post ran an op-ed he penned recently about the mortgage foreclosure crisis.

Ironically — perhaps naively — he included his personal e-mail address at the end of the piece. In the days and weeks that followed, he received hundreds of e-mails from all over the country. Being Jim Rokakis, his first inclination was to respond to them — all.

“My wife came down at 4 in the morning and said, ‘You can’t do this. You cannot respond to all of these personally.’ And she was right,” Rokakis now admits.

According to friends and colleagues, “being Jim Rokakis” means caring passionately about Cleveland, Cuyahoga County and northern Ohio. “It’s so in his marrow that he’ll never give up on the place, just never will,” says Andy Zajac, a friend since college. “He loves Cleveland, and northern Ohio, more broadly.”

Jim is a passionate reformer. He is always looking at ways to make government better able to serve residents, no matter what the topic.

— JANE RAWSON
MAYOR, SHAKER HEIGHTS, CLEVELAND SUBURB

For The Post, Rokakis wrote poignantly about two Cleveland residents whose deaths he blamed on the ravages of cheap credit, loans “predictably” gone bad, and communities spiraling into crime and decay as a result.

It’s a topic he knows well. As county treasurer he’s seen the steep decline in property tax payments. He’s witnessed long-time, law-abiding residents lose their homes. In 2006, more than 13,600 private mortgage foreclosures were filed in Cuyahoga County, the most in the nation, according to his op-ed.

Earlier this year, Rokakis testified before Congress — calling on members to help cities deal with a skyrocketing number of foreclosure filings, blamed on sub-prime mortgage loans and predatory lending practices.

For his work on these issues, Rokakis has been honored twice this year alone. American City & County magazine named him its County Leader of the Year. He also received the Government Service Award from NeighborWorks America for his contributions to affordable housing and community development.

In 2003, he received the EPA’s Smart Growth Award — one of just five winners nationwide. He was recognized for the county’s Housing Loan Enhancement Program (HELP) — his brainchild — which offers low-interest loans for home improvements.

American City & County wrote, “From every level of the campaign to preserve quality housing in the face of indifferent landlords and struggling homeowners, Jim Rokakis is lauded for his leadership and innovation, which has extended from Cuyahoga County across the state of Ohio.” With the Post opinion piece, his reach exceeds the Buckeye State’s borders.

From his bully pulpit as county treasurer since 1997, Rokakis has transformed the office far beyond its basic statutory requirements: “collecting taxes and managing the assets of the county.”

“I spent 19 years on the Cleveland City Council,” Rokakis explains, “and when I got to this office, I made it very clear to people that I have a lot of experience, and I have some very strong opinions, and where I can use my experience and put it to good use, I will.”

‘A passionate reformer’

Among his innovations, Rokakis developed the HELP program to address the decline of older suburbs and the resulting exodus of residents. The program offers home improvement loans at three percentage points less than the lowest rate a bank would otherwise charge. He was also instrumental in the passage of Ohio House Bill 293, which helps senior citizens stay in their homes by allowing them to defer all or part of their property taxes.

“There’s always something percolating out of his office, or out of him that helps people either become a homeowner or sustain their home,” says Lou Tisler, executive director, of Neighborhood Housing Services of Greater Cleveland.

Adds Jane Rawson, mayor of Shaker Heights, a Cleveland suburb: “Jim is a passionate reformer. He is always looking at ways to make government better able to serve residents, no matter what the topic.” She cites his “unbelievable leadership role on predatory lending,” calling him a state, if not national, expert on the topic.

City Council run makes history

“It’s said some run for office because they want to “be” something, while others want to “do” something. Rokakis clearly falls into the latter category.

Public service for this son of Greek immigrants — the first of his six siblings to be born in this country — was a lifelong dream.

“My father was a very political guy; we always talked politics in the house,” Rokakis recalls, albeit “in another language.” The son had wanted to be a public servant since he was a “bookish kid” with two newspaper routes, fascinated by the news of the day: President Kennedy’s assassination, the Vietnam War, unrest on college campuses.

“That was a great time to be delivering papers; you wanted to read them while you were delivering them.” (Today, he reads three a day, The Plain Dealer, The Wall Street Journal and The New York Times.)

West Side story

A few years hence, Rokakis was pursuing his interest in politics. He made his first run for a Cleveland City Council seat while he was a senior at Oberlin College, about 40 miles away. He’d make the trip back home in his brown Ford Pinto, according to Zajac, a fellow Clevelandeder who met Rokakis on campus in the mid-’70s. They had grown up in the same part of town but didn’t know each other.

“He knocked on my door in college at Oberlin College and he said, ‘You’re from the West Side of Cleveland, as though it was as important or significant as being from Beverly Hills,’” recalls Zajac, now a reporter for the Chicago Tribune. They spent “a couple of hours talking about Cleveland.”

Rokakis went on to win the election, becoming Cleveland’s youngest council member. From then till now, he’s never lost an election, although he’s quick to note his critics might say “I never ran for an office that was maybe out of reach.”

What about mayor of Cleveland; is it within his grasp? Many locals think Rokakis would be ideal for the job. It’s a moot point right now, since he doesn’t live in the city, but rather in an inner-ring Cuyahoga County suburb of Rocky River. The move out of his native city, to provide a better education for his children, he says, “was one of the most painful decisions of my life.”

“Some would say that I have probably failed to really take my chances for offices like Congress, or mayor, or county commissioner,” he says. “I also had an opportunity to run for state office. It’s all fair game.”

See ROKAKIS page 7
Your county could earn 200 free radon test kits

By KELLY ZONDERWYK SENIOR COMMUNITY SERVICES ASSOCIATE

To raise awareness of radon, its health effects and mitigation techniques, NACo is again conducting the County Radon Outreach Program, just in time for National Radon Awareness Month in January 2008. Ten counties will be selected to receive 200 free radon test kits to distribute in their communities in recognition of their outreach, education and mitigation efforts.

To apply, submit a summary of innovative activities planned to educate diverse and low-income population areas of your county throughout January. Applications will be considered based on the following components:

- need in the county for assistance in radon outreach
- innovative outreach, education and mitigation efforts for diverse and low-income sections of the county
- number of potential residents to be educated
- number of potential mitigated homes
- ability to inform additional populations of the county, including other residents, building contractors, building owners
- planned follow-up activities, and
- county Radon Zone (to determine your county’s zone visit: www.epa.gov/radon/zonemap.html)


Applications must be submitted by Dec. 1 and will receive their 200 free radon test kit by the end of December.

The Environmental Protection Agency has found radon responsible for about 21,000 lung cancer deaths every year. About 2,900 of these deaths occur among people who have never smoked, according to EPA.

Radon is an elusive radioactive gas that is invisible and odorless. It can seep through any crevice, from cracks in walls to gaps around pipes and sometimes through the water supply. Radon's non-discriminating nature means it can enter any type of home or building — new or old, with or without a basement.

Rokakis hasn't given up on Cleveland or its Indians

ROKAKIS from page 6

Supporters urged him to consider a bid a few years ago. In 2005, Roldo Bartimole, a local online columnist, wrote that Rokakis bring to City Hall “a human quality that has been missing for a generation or more…”

So far, neither the timing nor the political landscape have been right, Rokakis says, not ruling out a future run — should his family move back into the city.

“It’s an office that might interest me some day,” he says. “But for now, I work very closely with the current mayor.”

Asked how Rokakis has changed since their college days, Zajac says it’s hard to gauge — since they’ve both been evolving as contemporaries. If anything, Rokakis may be more pragmatic, while still retaining his essential can-do outlook.

“He’s got this abiding sense of optimism that he’s always had,” Zajac says. “Maybe 30 years ago, there was a sense that with just enough ingenuity and insight, Cleveland could solve its own problems; the region could solve its own problems.”

Today, he adds, “There’s a certain amount of idealism, but it’s always been tempered by, ‘OK, what is it that I can actually accomplish? What can I get done?’”

A ‘puckish’ sense of humor

Another quality Rokakis has retained is what Rawson calls “his fabulous sense of humor,” much of it self-effacing. “I like to poke fun at myself, especially in speeches; I think it’s easy to do,” Rokakis says. “I see the absurd in almost every situation I’m involved with.”

Zajac adds, “There’s a resilience in that guy that’s reflected in his sort of puckish, quick sense of humor. In the middle of something really dismal, he’ll make a joke about it.”

Maybe it comes from being a lifelong Cleveland Indians fan; Rokakis has been a season ticket holder for “about 20-some years” — only to suffer disappointment after disappointment.

Recently, the team commuters about “the collapse” of the Indians in the American League championship against the Boston Red Sox.

“At least the Browns didn’t lose,” Rokakis quipped, pausing several seconds before adding: “Of course, they didn’t play this weekend.”

Zajac says he’s always envied Rokakis’ ability to “step back and laugh even when the boat is leaking.” It could be Rokakis’ metaphor for Greater Cleveland: “You don’t always expect the best, but you always have hope,” Zajac says.

Being Jim Rokakis, there is hope that help is on the way for counties like Cuyahoga and cities like Cleveland.

“We’re too quiet. I think we need to continue to apply pressure at the federal level, on our Congress people, on our senators,” he says. “And that’s why I wrote the piece for The Post, just to remind them that there are real people living out here with real problems, and that they don’t see the connection.

“There is a connection between what they didn’t do in Washington and what they should be doing and what’s happening out here.”

(To read Rokakis’ opinion column, go to the Sept. 30, 2007 issue of the Washington Post online – www.washingtonpost.com)

Counties and Local Food Systems

This best practices publication, produced through NACo’s Center for Sustainable Communities, outlines methods counties can use to bolster local farm sectors and increase availability of healthy food for constituents.

Each of the four methods described in the publication — food councils, farm to school programs, infrastructure for small and medium producers and agricultural conservation easement programs — is followed by actual case studies that have worked for other counties.

This piece is part of NACo’s work to promote nutrition and healthy living with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s Leadership for Healthy Communities project.

For more information, and to request a copy of this publication, Contact Casey Dillon, cdillon@naco.org or 202/942-4243.
Defining benefits retirement plan will be enough to be covered under a pension system. Each plan to wear a colorful vest to work when these events occur. Unfortunately, fewer and fewer colleagues over time will come to appreciate the significance of this kind of anniversary clothing.

The mid 1980s most public agencies offered defined benefits retirement systems. That number is now considerably smaller throughout the United States, in government and in the private sector. In the private sector, for example, the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation reports that there were 114,000 defined-benefit plans operating in 1985. By the end of September 2005, that number had shrunk to 30,330. This represents a rerun of “Honey, I Shrunk the Retirement System.” The same is true of offering lifetime paid health insurance benefits after retirement. The current, popular effort at dealing with America’s growing health care and retirement savings crises is not working for the society as a whole and will not work in the future. A sad reality is that for many reasons, many people are not preparing for their retirement, are not saving what they should and could, and do not take steps to improve their own health. Any doubts? Talk to one of the 18 percent of the population that still smokes. Talk to the perhaps 40 percent of the population that is obese. Talk to the growing millions of diabetes patients. Until we get our act together and create a national vision that will treat the population's health problems and the problems of aging—including retirement—it is important that we appreciate all we have in the case of a defined-benefit retirement plan.

It is also important that we celebrate events, such as having enough vested service credits to guarantee some form of pension. For a competent, young and articulate HR Daughter like Elyse whose very bright public administration career is in its take-off phase, it is also valuable to celebrate the sense of stability that comes with retirement vesting. The HR Doctor sees thousands of job applicants each year. Most of them end up getting a letter back signed by the HR Doctor pointing out that, regrettably, another candidate will be employed for this or that vacancy.

Often one of the major characteristics that helps move a decision is the extent to which the candidate displays mature judgment and behavior. Becoming vested in a retirement system is a sign of those characteristics. When an employee vests, whether that requires six years of service, as the statewide system in Florida mandates, or five or 10 years with many agencies operating their own plans require, reaching this milestone is increasingly difficult as plans move to defined contribution models and as employees move around in the workforce more.

That provides all the more reason to stop for a moment, put on your vest and see if anybody else appreciates the basis for your unusual dress.

As part of NACO’s 2008 Presidential Election Project, over 300 of your fellow county officials have endorsed a candidate for president, and we want to hear from you. We want to know whom you’re supporting in the race and why you’re supporting him or her.

Please fill out this form and return it to Kim Rogers at NACO, 25 Massachusetts Ave. NW, Suite 500, Washington, DC 20001 or e-mail her the info at krogers@naco.org.

In the meantime, check out the list of endorsements at www.nacoblog.blogspot.com.

Endorsement of 2008 Presidential Candidate

Your Name ____________________________________________

Position ____________________________________________

County ___________________________ State _________

Candidate Supporting ________________________________

Why I’m Supporting __________________________________

Role with the Campaign (Any Steering Committees, leadership positions, etc.) __________________________________

Loan Effort with the Campaign (Any Steering Committees, leadership positions, etc.) __________________________________

Manual created by Matthew Fellows.
Model Programs FROM THE NATION’S COUNTIES

County preserves farming heritage through rural economic development

BY CHARLES TAYLOR
SENIOR STAFF WRITER

“Does chocolate milk come from brown cows?”

The question still “shocks” yet amuses Rachel Chieppa when she hears it from kids in Isle of Wight County, a largely rural jurisdiction, perhaps best known for its Smithfield hams.

Chieppa is in charge of the county’s Rural Economic Development (RED) Program, a 2007 NACo Achievement Award winner. Through advocacy, agribusiness recruitment and education, it’s her job to promote and preserve farming in this southeastern Virginia county.

“This has been the primary economic development activity within our county for over 250 years,” says Tom Ivy, chairman of the county’s Board of Supervisors. Farming and forestry make up “97 percent of the county’s landscape.”

However, like many rural communities near metropolitan areas (Virginia Beach-Norfolk-Newport News, in this case), development pressures are growing. Isle of Wight County’s population increased nearly 17 percent from 2000 to 2006, according to Census Bureau estimates.

“We have a lot of people moving to our area from other areas because of the rural nature,” Ivy adds. As many communities have witnessed, those very same emigrés often want to change the character of their new communities.

The RED program supports the county’s adopted policy that 80 percent of its land will remain in agriculture and forestry or be preserved for those purposes, Ivy says. “This program fits in with our desire to keep the vast majority of our open space open.”

To help accomplish that goal, the county created a Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easements (PACE) program as part of its rural economic development effort.

Under PACE, the county will purchase landowners’ development rights. In exchange, a conservation easement is placed on the land, ensuring that it will forever remain in agricultural or forestry production.

“I think, in the long run, it’s going to help a lot of farm families keep the family farm,” says Dee Dee Darden, a peanut, corn, soybean and wheat farmer who serves on the committee that oversees the program. “We’re very fortunate in our area that our Board of Supervisors had the foresight several years ago to initiate this type of program.”

Though approved in 2005, the PACE program is still in its infancy. The first applications from property owners were submitted earlier this year. The county’s goal for the program is to preserve 500 acres in its first year and to have 2,000 acres in the program by 2010. The county board has budgeted $750,000 per year for conservation easements.

For the overall Rural Economic Development Program, the cost of hiring a manager is a consideration. Chieppa’s stewardship, is also considered. People are “doing things where they can get the public on to their farm and educate them about their farming operation and their family farm.”

“Ivy said the program, under Chieppa’s stewardship, is also helping instill a sense of pride within the farming community by creating events such as Farmer’s Appreciation Day and recognizing a farming family of the year at the County Fair.”

“The program has been instrumental with our farming community in developing new ways of producing revenue utilizing agricultural practices,” Ivy says. Chieppa has worked with farmers to help them connect directly with the non-farming public. This includes promoting “agri-tourism.”

“We’re trying to do is encourage more people to do pick-your-own operations, and corn mazes, and grow pumpkins,” she says — “do things where they can get the public on to their farm and educate them about their farming operation and their family farm.”

“If they’re coming out, it’s a family event. It’s something they can do as a family, and it’s really tourism.”

Ivy said the program, under Chieppa’s stewardship, is also helping instill a sense of pride within the farming community by creating events such as Farmer’s Appreciation Day and recognizing a farming family of the year at the County Fair.

“This has really increased the pride and morale of the farming community and helped to continue and develop better relations between our county government and the agricultural community,” Ivy says.

To do educational outreach, Chieppa partnered with the Virginia Cooperative Extension to host preschool and after-school agriculture programs at the county’s three public libraries. It’s there that she’s likely to get the “chocolate milk” questions.

“We feel that if we educate the children, they will be better aware of where their food comes from,” Chieppa explains, “and maybe they’ll go home and tell their parents.”

“Because what we’re seeing is parents of those children [who] are one or two generations removed from the farm, so their knowledge of agriculture is so limited.”

For more information about the Isle of Wight County’s Rural Economic Development Program, contact Chieppa at rchieppa@isleofwight.va.us or visit www.co.isleofwight.va.us/agriculture.

(Model Programs from the Nation’s Counties highlights Achievement Award-winning programs. For more information on this and other NACo’s Achievement Award winners, visit NACo’s Web site, www.naco.org or Resource Library’s Model Countys Programs.)

What’s in a Seal?

Auglaize County, Ohio

www.auglaizecounty.org

The seal was designed and drawn by Larry McLean and contains elements that highlight different aspects of Auglaize County.

In the center of the seal is a silhouette of Auglaize County. Beneath the silhouette is the date 1848, the year the county was established.

The upper left-hand section features a drawing of an Indian arrowhead and peace pipe, symbols of the county’s ancient history and folklore.

Across from these symbols is a depiction of NASA’s Eagle moon lander on the surface of the moon, representing the achievements of Neil Armstrong, a native of Auglaize County, and the first man to walk on the moon.

The depiction of corn and wheat, below the moon landing, represents the agriculture sector of Auglaize County.

Across from this and underneath the arrowhead and peace pipe is a drawing of an industrial factory with a gear in the foreground, which represents the county’s commercial and industrial sectors.

(If you would like your county’s seal featured, please contact Matthew Fellows at 202/942-4256 or mfellows@naco.org.)

Cotton farm, like the one pictured here, are among the focus of Isle of Wight County, Va.’s Rural Economic Development Program. Its goals range from recruiting new agribusiness and diversifying existing farms to promoting “agri-tourism.”

Eagle moon
News From the Nation's Counties

**CALIFORNIA**

Several counties will share in a $1 million settlement with Home Depot over violations of state fire regulations, and hazardous materials and waste laws.

The judgment against the company is one of the largest of its kind in the United States against a big box retailer, according to the San Jose Mercury News.

Several state agencies began investigating Home Depot after a 2004 incident in Los Angeles. A contractor transporting waste from an L.A. Home Depot caused an explosion after illegally mixing the waste products. The state highway patrol subsequently found that the contractor was illegally transporting the store chain’s hazardous wastes statewide.

The company cooperated with the investigation and did not admit any wrongdoing. However, it agreed to update its programs for handling hazardous substances.

**COLORADO**

Next to nothing: That’s what employees at government buildings in downtown BOULDER COUNTY are throwing in the trash under a new Zero Waste Pilot.

The program is designed to help the county meet its goal of diverting 50 percent of countywide waste from its landfill by 2010 and zero waste “or dishing near” by 2025.

“You’d be surprised how much you can divert from your trash can,” said Eric Heyboer, resource conservation specialist for the Boulder County Resource Conservation Division.

“And it’s not just about saving space in landfills—a zero-waste approach saves energy, reduces pollution and conserves natural resources.”

Under the pilot program, custodial staff collect commingled containers and mixed paper at all desks; they also collect compost from kitchens, restrooms (paper towels), conference rooms and common areas. For more information, visit the Boulder County Resource Conservation Division Web site at www.bouldercountycycles.net.

**FLORIDA**

Officials in LEE COUNTY hope they’ve finally succeeded in laying to rest a $10 million earmark in the 2005 transportation law for a new interstate interchange in their county.

According to a report in the Transportation Weekly, the Lee County Metropolitan Planning Organization voted for a second time, on Sept. 28, to transfer funds from the interchange project to a project that would improve I-75 in Lee and Collier counties.

The earmark for the Coconut Grove interchange remains shrouded in mystery. It appeared in the 2005 SAFETEA-LU Act after Congress passed the bill and before the president had signed it.

It replaced an earmark, originally in the congressionally approved legislation, which was intended to fund the I-75 improvements. No one has taken responsibility for changing the legislation.

The New York Times in an Oct. 7 editorial supported a call for an investigation by an anti-earmarks group into the bait and switch. Meanwhile, now that local officials have done their part, it’s up to Congress to correct the mysterious sleight of hand and change the earmark back to its original intention.

**IDAHO**

Idaho’s dairy and cattle associations are suing GOODING COUNTY over new ordinances they say are bad for the livestock industry—and JEROME COUNTY could be next, the Times-News reported.

Counts in the state’s Magic Valley region have been tightening their confined-animal feeding operation (CAFO) laws. Among other things, Gooding County’s new ordinances, which took effect in June, limit where CAFO owners can spread manure and ban new CAFOs from within a mile of two rivers in the county. CAFO owners are also prohibited from selling manure out of state.

The Jerama County ordinances, still being drafted, will likely address distribution of CAFO waste, require greater setbacks from roads and tougher odor-control enforcement.

“|a expect to be challenged no matter what we come up with,” said Carl Nellis, chairman of Jerome County’s planning board, which is drafting the new ordinances.

**IOWA**

CRAWFORD COUNTY officials have banned a popular bicycling event from their county, after paying a recent $350,000 settlement to the widow of a man who died during the event three years ago, The Des Moines Register reported.

County officials say their roads aren’t designed for bicycle travel, and therefore are too risky for riders in the Register’s Annual Great Bicycle Ride Across Iowa (RAGBRAI). The bike ride is sponsored by The Register newspaper.

“RAGBRAI at this point would not be welcomed in this county because of the lawsuit factors,” Dan Mathewson, chairman of the Board of Supervisors, said recently. “As long as the laws read the way they do, I don’t want them in my county.”

In 2004, a Davenport man was thrown from his bike after hitting a center-line crack on a county road. Following its insurance company’s advice, Crawford County settled with the man’s widow but admitted no negligence on its part.

“Iowa’s county engineers’ association will lobby the state to pass legislation protecting counties from liability in such cases.

**MARYLAND**

Uninsured HOWARD COUNTY residents will have access to health care under the recently announced Healthy Howard Plan.

While not insurance, the plan will offer primary care services, deeply discounted prescription drugs, in-hospital and outpatient care, and specialty care services.

To qualify, Howard County residents must make no more than three times the poverty level, have been uninsured for one year and have legally resided in the county for one year. The enrollment goal for the first year of the program is 2,000 participants.

“The Healthy Howard Plan brings government, business and citizens together to address the issue of the uninsured in Howard County and moves our county one step closer to becoming the model public health community,” County Executive Ken Ulman said.

The plan also emphasizes personal responsibility; participants will be assigned health coaches to assist in achieving health and wellness goals, and significantly, it does not rely solely on taxpayers and government. “Partnerships with community organizations including Howard County General Hospital, Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions and ChaseMan Group Practice will help make this program possible,” said Dr. Peter Beilenson, the county’s health director.

**MINNESOTA**

HENNEPIN COUNTY officials have decided to play ball with landowners who held property needed for completion of a new stadium for the Minnesota Twins.

In a settlement with landowners, the county recently announced it will pay $28 million for property it originally valued at $13 million. A three-judge condemnation panel raised the price tag to $23.8 million, according to the Star Tribune, but the property owners filed an appeal seeking $45 million. The compromise avoids trial that was scheduled to begin in November.

“We are happy to have reached a settlement,” Hennepin County Commissioner Mike Opat said in a statement. “It’s been a long time, and a lot of battling.”

Twin spokesman Kevin Smith told the newspaper, “Now we can focus on building this iconic ballpark for the future.”

In 2006, county commissioners approved a 0.15 percent sales and use tax to fund construction of the ballpark and related facilities. The county acquired the land through quick-take condemnation in May, and a ground was broken for the $522 million, 42,000-seat stadium in August. It’s scheduled to open in 2010.

**MISSOURI**

Missouri county leaders say they have changed state law that gives landowners more power to create their own “villages” preempts local government authority, the News-Leader reported.

Citing legal experts, members of the Missouri Association of Counties and the Association of County Commissioners said the change could allow property owners in a county to form a village—sidestepping county jurisdiction, and planning and zoning laws.

Dave Coonrod, Greene County presiding commissioner, expressed “frustration” with the state legislature and governor “in their continued attempt to preempt our local authority and erode our ability to manage and address issues that affect us locally.”

The village law is currently being tested in Stone County, where a landowner has petitioned the county to have his 400 acres declared a village.

State association officials said they will work through the state legislature in 2008 to try to have the law rescinded.

See NEWS page 11

NACo on the Move

NACo Officers and County Officials

President-Elect Don Stapley was in San Francisco Oct. 18 to speak at the opening of the NACo/NLC Interoperability Academy.

NACo Staff

Lisa Cole, director of NACo Financial Services Corporation, gave a presentation at the inaugural meeting of the Wisconsin Counties Association’s Deferred Compensation Advisory Committee Oct. 9 in Wisconsin Dells, Wis. The advisory committee provides information and feedback to WCA and NACo regarding the NACo 457 Deferred Compensation Program.

Lesley Buchan, community services program director, worked with senior associate Christina Rowland and program assistant Casey Dillon, helped lead small group discussions with national, state and local leaders at the at the Childhood Obesity Prevention Summit hosted by Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s Leadership for Healthy Communities in Washington, D.C. Oct. 19.

Associate Legislative Director Alyson McLaughlin spoke at a joint meeting of the National Association of County Recorders, Election Officials and Clerks (NACRC) and the International Association of County Recorders, Election Officials and Clerks (IACREOT) in Baltimore Oct. 7 on pending federal legislation to rewrite the Help America Vote Act (H.R. 811).

(On the Move is compiled by Matthew Fellows, editorial assistant.)

www.naco.org
9 ways to go green
Environmental considerations for your next furniture purchase

By Linda VanWyk

Having grown adept at seeking recycled products, government buyers now find the environmental bar raised higher. Where it was once enough to buy recycled, nowadays the purchasing mandate is likely to take into account a much broader swath of environmental concerns.

So what constitutes an environmental product according to this new definition of green? Recycled content matters, of course, but so do a host of other attributes involving how a product was made, packaged and shipped.

Consider how this trend affects purchases of one big-ticket item: office furniture. Here are nine considerations now in play for government purchasers who want to buy green:

Built to last
The longer a chair lasts, the longer it takes to wind up in a landfill. From an environmental standpoint, it doesn’t get any simpler. That’s why durability is the foremost green criterion for office furniture purchases. What to look for? The best warranty you can find. There’s no sure indication of a product’s durability than the manufacturer’s confidence in it.

A word of caution: Beware of “lifetime” warranties loaded with fine print. A straightforward warranty that covers multi-shift usage and doesn’t get bogged down with exclusions is preferable to a so-called lifetime warranty packed with conditions and qualifications.

Easy to change
Before Herman Miller introduced the Action Office panel system in the late 1960s, reconfiguring an office meant demolishing fixed walls and choking landfills with waste. Since Action Office, reconfiguring has meant moving some panels around. The advent of modular systems furniture ushered in a new way of thinking about environmental responsibility in the workplace. Today’s rule of thumb: If it’s not easy to reconfigure and reuse, it’s probably not worth considering.

Cracle to cradle
Since the onset of the Industrial Revolution, most manufacturers have assumed a cradle-to-grave life cycle — that is, you use a product until it wears out and then bury it. Instead, today’s progressive manufacturers are working toward a cradle-to-cradle approach, which assumes that a product eventually will be recycled rather than disposed of.

Cradle-to-cradle manufacturers develop products that are easy to take apart, easy to recycle and generally easy on the environment — even to the point of evaluating the chemical makeup of raw materials to be sure they’re earth friendly.

If you’re looking to buy green, look first for a manufacturer with a cradle-to-cradle philosophy.

A breath of fresh air
Ever notice how new cars, new construction and new furniture all have a distinctive odor? Better that you didn’t — because that smell indicates harmful contaminants are evaporating into the air. Many government workplaces are subject to stringent regulations pertaining to the emission of these volatile organic compounds, or VOCs.

To help protect your employees, choose low-emitting office furniture that meets standards set forth by either the independent Green guard Environmental Institute or the Business and Institutional Furniture Manufacturer’s Association.

Recycled at the beginning
Many furniture makers reveal the percentage of recycled content in their products, so it’s relatively easy to narrow your choices in this regard. Herman Miller’s flagship Aeron chair, for instance, contains 66 percent recycled materials; its Ethospace frame-and-tile system contains 35 percent.

County voters to decide on adding more freeholders to board

NEWS from page 10

NEW JERSEY
Will Warren County remain the last county in New Jersey with a three-member Board of Freeholders? Voters will decide next month whether to increase their representation to five members, The Express Times reported. A similar measure in 2001 was defeated by 290 votes. If the question passes this year, the two new candidates would run in the 2008 election.

“...if you have the right three,” Henry Dinger, an independent freeholder candidate, countered. “Five is too many if you have the wrong five.”

OHIO
Layoffs may be in the offering for Hamilton County employees as the county copes with a possible $35 million deficit next year. County Administrator Patrick Thompson told employees in a recent letter that declines in sales and property taxes, and state funding are the culprits.

“It’s as bad as bad can get,” Thompson told The Cincinnati Post. “It’s not like we’re everopending. We’ve done a very good job of keeping expenditures below the rate of inflation. The revenues have not kept up with the rate of inflation.”

The county has a $255 million general fund budget. In recent years, employee raises have been trimmed; technology investments have been reduced, and some maintenance projects have been delayed. But Thompson said more cuts are needed.

He said his recommended budget will include “significant reductions across all departments.”

VIRGINIA
• Prys or Escape? It’s a question taxicab riders in Arlington County will be able to ponder with increasing frequency. The County Board recently approved EnviroCAB’s application to operate an all-hybrid taxi fleet of 50 Toyota Prius and Ford Escape vehicles. The board also accepted the county manager’s determination that Arlington’s existing taxi companies be allowed to add 35 new hybrid cabs.

EnviroCAB, a start-up company, said it was inspired by the county’s Fresh AIRE program, an initiative that aims to slash greenhouse gas emissions by county buildings and operations 10 percent by 2012.

“Our efforts to raise awareness about the importance of reducing greenhouse gas emissions are clearly paying off,” said County Board Chairman Paul Ferguson. Six taxicab companies currently operate 666 taxicabs in the county.

In another nod to the environment, Fairfax County recently adopted a tree preservation ordinance to protect trees in the following categories: individual specimen, heritage, memorial and street trees.

The new measure isn’t intended to protect large wooded tracts, county officials said. Instead, it affects individual trees that property owners voluntarily agree to safeguard.

The Board of Supervisors approved the law, noting that even a single tree can benefit the environment. One mature tree with a 26-foot canopy can absorb the emissions of a vehicle driven 11,500 miles every year.

Homeowners, residents or groups can recommend individual trees for protection. After a public hearing, the board will approve the preservation of specific trees. Easements also may be required to protect a tree’s roots. If needed, property owners will donate the easements to the county.

The penalty for removing a protected tree without county permission is a $2,500 fine.

WASHINGTON
• Whatcom County health officials are monitoring the progress of a deadly fungus that has killed eight and infected almost 200 people in neighboring British Columbia in Canada, the Bellingham Herald reported.

In the past two years, four Whatcom County residents tested positive for the fungus, cryptococcus gattii, two of whom died from the disease, according to Joni Hensley, communicable disease supervisor for the county.

Cryptococcus gattii is a microscopic fungus that grows on trees, floats in the air and can live in water. Humans and animals can become infected by breathing its spores. Symptoms include cough, pain, headaches, shortness of breath, fever, night sweats and weight loss.

Health officials aren’t sure how the fungus — usually found in tropical and subtropical climates — arrived in the area. One theory is that it was accidentally transported from its native environment. Another is that it existed in British Columbia for centuries, undetected, and that recent climate changes woke it from dormancy.

• King County’s flood plan and flood management programs were named among the best-in-the-nation by the Federal Emergency Management Agency. The FEMA rating means lower flood insurance rates for home owners in unincorporated King County beginning Oct. 1 for an average savings of $262 per year.

“This rating does not evaluate the condition of our flood protection facilities, which have been under-funded over the years and are in dire need of improvement,” County Executive Ron Sims said. “As honored as we feel for a best-in-the-nation rating, I won’t rest easy until we have the flood prevention structures to match our floodplain management planning.”

FEMA named King County a Class 2 community in the Community Rating System. Only two other communities have Class 2 ratings out of 1,200 participating communities nationwide. They are the cities of Tulsa, Okla. and Roseville, Calif.

(News From the Nation’s Counties is compiled by Charles Taylor, senior editor, and Sterling Schlotterbeck, executive editor. If you have an item for News From, please e-mail staylor@naco.org.)
Green options for office furniture abound

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You might even see a break-down comparing post-consumer to pre-consumer recycled content. Post-consumer is preferable because it encompasses materials that have completed their life cycle in the consumer market and otherwise would be discarded — plastic bottles, for instance. Pre-consumer materials consist largely of manufacturing scrap that was never used in the consumer market.

Recyclable at the end

Even more important than the percentage of recycled content is whether your furniture is recyclable at the end of its useful life. If you’re serious about taking advantage of recyclability down the road, pay attention to how a piece of furniture is put together and how easy it is to take apart. If it’s a hassle to disassemble, its components likely won’t be recycled someday even if they theoretically could be.

Let it shine

Can your choice of office furniture reduce your electric bill? Absolutely. Consider glass tiles, translucent screens, low-height panels — anything that lets light reach interior spaces. The more daylight your workplace gets, the less artificial light it needs — and the daylight your workplace gets, the more reach interior spaces. The more that lets light through, the happier your employees will be.

Wrap it up

It’s hard to be attentive to environmental measures on the factory floor — and it’s all too easy to forget about them entirely on the trucks. Bulky packaging can sidestep the best intentions if it ends up in a landfill. Stay green by requesting returnable packaging (like shipping blankets) or recyclable packaging (like shipping blankets), both of which are easier to dispose of at the end of its useful life.

Social responsibility

Invisible to the naked eye, environmental responsibility is a priority at Johnson County. The Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design program promotes green construction practices and awards buildings that make the grade. Given stricter environmental criteria, government buyers are examining the green characteristics of furniture from a broader perspective than ever before. Fortunately, the industry is ready with environmental practices that stand up to scrutiny.

For more information about environmentally responsible purchasing, visit www.greengovernment.com.

Meet the maker

Finally, consider how the furniture supplier you’re evaluating does business, not just how it makes products. Does the company still sound green after articulating its policies toward renewable energy, solid-waste recycling, water conservation and air emissions? Also, are any of its facilities LEEED-certified by the U.S. Green Building Council?

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(NACo is one of five national co-founders of the U.S. Communities Government Purchasing Alliance. For more information, contact Steve Swendiman at sswendiman@naco.org or visit www.uscommunities.org.)