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Why We Need to 'Restore the Partnership'

BY LARRY NAAKE
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, NACO

The National Association of Counties (NACo) has embarked on a mission to remind our nation's leaders of the singular importance of federalism to the American system of government and to get those leaders to run the system as our founding fathers intended. We call this effort "Restore the Partnership." Through it, we hope to strengthen the relationships between counties, cities, states and the federal government, in order to better serve the American people.

This bipartisan effort is directed toward the candidates for president during the 2008 election, the members of Congress in the Senate and House of Representatives, and the next administration that will take office in 2009. This is a long-term movement that may take many years to achieve.

Why is this project necessary?

It was not that many years ago when counties, cities and states were in fact "partners" with the federal government in identifying and developing solutions to problems facing our common residents.

The White House, the agencies and the Congress would ask for our advice early in the process as they were developing programs or legislative proposals.

In addition, we would actively take our ideas to Congress or the administration. A perfect example of this approach was the unfunded mandates proposal we took to Congress in 1993 that was championed by former U.S. Senator Dirk Kempthorne of Idaho (now Secretary of the Interior) and became law in 1995.

The Office of Intergovernmental Affairs



Larry Naake

was located in the "policy" side of the White House, because they truly did want our input as they developed proposals dealing with health care, housing and community development, justice and law enforcement, public lands, the environment, transportation, social services and many other critical issues.

There was even a Senate Subcommittee on Intergovernmental Relations that focused on our federal system of government and how we could best work for all Americans.

And, though many may not remember, there was a President's Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (ACIR) that was composed of 26 members representing the Senate and House of Representatives, the president's cabinet, governors, state legislators, county officials, city officials and the public.

It was established in 1959 and its mission was "to strengthen the American federal system and improve the ability of federal, state and local governments to work together cooperatively, efficiently and effectively."

At one time, it had a staff of more than 50 who worked with state and local governments to:

- identify emerging intergovernmental issues, trends and turning points
- stimulate thought about American federalism
- educate leaders and the public about the impacts of intergovernmental reforms, and
- promote stronger intergovernmental communication, cooperation and coordination as the critical basis for an effective federal system.

Historically, ACIR recommended to the president and Congress programs such as General Revenue Sharing and revenue sharing block grants like the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) that exist to this day and remain extremely effective in our counties and cities.

These were lofty goals and heady times for our federal system that reached its peak in the 1970s and 1980s. All was certainly not perfect. There were still disagreements about important issues, but at least there were institutions where discussion and dialogue could take place and solutions to our common issues could be formulated.

What has changed during the last 15 years

State and local governments, and the associations that represent you, are rarely consulted about proposals that are coming out of the administration or Congress. Rather, we are summoned after the proposals are developed, told what they are and asked to support them.

We are constantly opposing and fight-





ing federal preemptions and unfunded mandates, usually because we are not consulted early in the process. There were two perfect examples of this in 2007. The first was the "so-called" Election Reform proposal that mandated election processes and procedures that would not work, would cost counties billions of dollars and at the same time have the federal government intrude in traditional state and local authorities. The second was the "Waters of the U. S." proposal that would expand the permitting authority of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and would preempt state and local land use authority.

The Office of Intergovernmental Relations is now on the "political" side of the White House, indicating a desire to mobilize support for their self-generated initiatives rather than seek input from us on policy matters.

There is no longer a Senate Subcommittee on Intergovernmental Relations.

And, the Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (ACIR) was abolished by Congress in 1996. In fact, during the debate on the floor of the House of Representatives, one member asked: "Why do we need this ACIR? What does the federal government have to do with state and local governments?" Obviously, this congressman never read the Federalist Papers or the Constitution of the United States!

It seems that over the years, public interest groups like NACo, the National Governors Association, the National League of Cities and the U. S. Conference of Mayors have come to be considered by many in Congress and the administration as "special interest groups" like the many trade associations in Washington, D.C. rep-

resenting specific sectors of business, rather than partners with the federal government in identifying and developing solutions to the common problems facing our common residents.

We want all of this to change. We want our federal system to work better than it has in recent times.

We want, in the words of the former ACIR, "to strengthen the American federal system and improve the ability of federal, state and local governments to work together cooperatively, efficiently and effectively."

What we want can improve the lives of all Americans. We want to "RESTORE THE PARTNERSHIP!"