

Weekly Legislative Update for State Historic Preservation Offices

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1. CONGRESS CONSIDERS OPTIONS FOR ECONOMIC STIMULUS: STATES, GRASSROOTS GROUPS PRESENT IDEAS

This week, Congress continued to consider a large economic stimulus package and its constituent parts. The package, now proposed to be as large as \$600 billion to \$1 trillion, received consideration from the full House Appropriations Committee this week in a hearing featuring three governors and several nonprofit heads. At the same time, national groups have been submitting economic stimulus proposals to the Obama Biden transition team. Congressional leadership has pledged to present President Obama a stimulus bill within his first days of office.

Questions Appropriators are Asking

Most members of the House Appropriations Committee attended the December 11th hearing. Three governors, Jim Douglas of Vermont, Jim Doyle of Wisconsin, and Jon Corzine of New Jersey provided testimony to the House's spending committee. Their comments explained the impact of the recession on their state's economies.

Testimony from the governors followed on a speech President-elect Barack Obama gave to the National Governor's Association last week. Obama called for partnerships between governments to support economic recovery. The hearing explored how these partnerships work now, federal and state partnership programs that help those most in need, and what programs rely on federal support most. Many appropriators in attendance noted that the economic stimulus bill will be a vehicle for supplemental funding to programs that satisfy these requirements.

The bill will also create jobs aiding green energy efficiency conversion. Governor Corzine spoke to this need, prompted by a question from Representative Marcy Kaptur (D-OH).

Representative John Murtha (D-PA) asked the governors for insights on streamlining infrastructural improvements. The stimulus bill will support "ready to go" improvements that will generate new jobs fast.

The Committee asked Corzine, who came to elected office after a career in banking and finance, to provide some explanation of our nation's severe recession. This question has been explained many times in many Hill contexts as Congress sorts through solutions – generally as a timeline tying together the housing bubble and related mortgage lending practices. Corzine suggested the underlying problem is citizens' inability to grow income relative to their debt. The solution to our nation's economic problems would be solved by improving homeowner's ability to expand their wealth in their primary investment – their homes.

Congressman Jose Serrano (D-NY), representing New York's 16th District including Yankee Stadium and Little Italy noted that cultural institutions seemed to be left out of discussions about green jobs and economic recovery. Focusing exclusively on human services and construction-related infrastructural improvements disregarded the value culture plays in economics – as a source of new jobs, and as a means of maintaining and improving our nation's quality of life while getting through this temporary downturn.

Wisconsin Governor Doyle responded states are having to make agonizing choices. Cuts have been made to cultural programs and more are coming.

Requests from Preservationists

The economic stimulus bill has attracted many ideas from preservation's advocates. National preservation partners have been discussing legislative ideas and 2009 priorities for months, and many of these ideas have now been proposed for inclusion in the stimulus legislation.

The National Conference of State Historic Preservation Offices submitted a request for \$50 million for preservation grants to be passed through the SHPOs. The request mirrors the \$25 million appropriation received in the 1983 Jobs Act. NCSHPO is also supporting disaster aid for IA, IN and TX.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation submitted a broad set of proposals tying together the Trust's and its partner organization's ideas. The Trust's proposal includes an increase in the Federal Rehabilitation Tax Credit from 20% to 40% for FRTC projects under \$2 million – following up on a provision within the Community Restoration and Revitalization Act (H.R.1043/S.584). The proposal includes disaster-relief funding for historic properties in Iowa and Texas. The National Trust is posting its stimulus package proposal on its website: www.preservationnation.org.

The Northeast Midwest Institute's Older Industrial Cities group is drafting a complementary request supporting historic preservation. This group is requesting \$130 million for the Historic Preservation Fund for pass through grants; \$30 million for the Save America's Treasures program; and \$100 million for federal investment in state historic rehabilitation tax credit programs.

2. HOUSE LEADERSHIP ANNOUNCES COMMITTEE ASSIGNMENTS

This week, House of Representatives leadership announced a number of Congressional committee assignments. Speaker of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) announced the Democrats' choices for positions on Ways and Means, Oversight and Government Reform, Energy and Commerce and Appropriations. The GOP approved most top committee posts. Committees with jurisdiction over grassroots preservation issues in 2009 include:

Appropriations

Democratic appointments to the House Appropriations Committee included Representatives Lincoln Davis (D-TN) and John Salazar (D-CO). Republicans approved Representative Jerry Lewis (R-CA) as Ranking Member of the overarching House spending committee.

Ways and Means

Democratic appointments included Representatives Danny Davis (D-IL); Bob Etheridge (D-NC); Raul Grijalva (D-AZ); Brian Higgins (D-NY); and John Yarmuth (D-KY). Republicans approved Representative Dave Camp (R-MI) as Ranking Member of the House's tax committee.

Natural Resources

Republicans have yet to pick their lead for the Natural Resources Committee that has jurisdiction over historic preservation program authorization – including the Preserve America Save America's Treasures programs. The latter's authorization legislation was included within a lands omnibus considered immediately prior to the 110th Congress's lame duck session. This did not pass, but is expected to be reintroduced early in the next Congress. Representatives Doc Hastings (R-WA) or Rob Bishop (R-UT) will likely fill the top GOP position on this committee.

Transportation

The six-year transportation bill, also known as the "Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) governing federal surface transportation spending was signed into law in 2005, and will expire on September 30 of next year. The reauthorized bill will be one of the most significant for preservationists in the next Congress. The bill's transportation enhancement program provides more funding for historic preservation projects than any other federal source. The Democratic Steering Committee unanimously reelected Representative Jim Oberstar (D-MN) to lead the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee in the 111th Congress. This week, the GOP approved John Mica's (R-FL) place as Ranking Member of the T and I Committee.