HOUSE DELAYS TRANSPORTATION BILL REAUTHORIZATION

Villaraigosa, Mayors Call for Bipartisan Action to Save/Create Jobs

By Kevin McCarty

House leaders insisted on another extension of the nation’s surface transportation law, seeking more time to find consensus on their renewal plan while rejecting efforts by House and Senate colleagues, mayors, industry leaders and others who urged them to take up the bipartisan Senate bill (S. 1813).

Prior to adjourning for the Easter work period, the House initiated, and the Senate later passed, legislation providing for a 90-day extension of the SAFETEA-LU law through June 30.

President Obama signed the extension legislation (H.R. 4281) into law hours before a March 31 deadline took effect. This ninth extension, if allowed to run the full 90 days, means more than 1,000 days will have elapsed since SAFETEA-LU first expired September 30, 2009.

Pressure has been mounting for weeks on House leaders to find a bipartisan strategy to successfully navigate divisions within that chamber over how to move forward on a renewal plan. In this regard, mayors strongly urged House Members to adopt the Senate measure, or at least act on another bipartisan plan.

This campaign, led by Conference of Mayors President Los Angeles Mayor Antonio R. Villaraigosa, focused on direct mayoral outreach to local representatives and the use of social media. Specifically, mayors described how key local projects were being delayed and disrupted. Mayors also talked about how this year’s construction season is adversely affected and how additional jobs would be lost if action on final renewal legislation was again postponed in favor of a temporary extension.

It is certain that there is a strong bipartisan consensus for action within the House on selected reforms, certain revenue raisers, and spending levels at roughly current funding levels for both highway and transit programs. But to date, the political debate has not allowed legislation with these features to come before the full House.

Some House leaders continue to believe that a multiple-year renewal plan can be drafted, brought before the full House for approval, and reconciled with the Senate bill by June 30, even as the clock ticks away on the most recent extension.

San Francisco Mayor Lee Convenes First Meeting of Technology and Innovation Task Force

By David W. Burns

San Francisco Mayor Edwin M. Lee convened and Chaired the Conference of Mayors Technology and Innovation Task Force in an all-digital format, over a live video meeting for the first time, March 30.

“IT’s appropriate we’re attempting to make use of technology and take advantage of it for this task force since it’s a good example of a technology our cities can make use of,” remarked Lee.

The task force, created at the 80th Winter Meeting in January by Conference of Mayors President Los Angeles Mayor Antonio R. Villaraigosa, focuses on three main issues:

• creating a vision for the future of cities as engines of innovation and technology;
• serving as a convener bringing necessary public and private sector participants together such as technology drivers, business leaders, and mayors, together to discuss the application of technology to improve cities; and
• the designing, launching, and participating in endeavors that demonstrate how technology and innovation can create economic and social value for cities.

“As you know, we have been dealing with e-governance for over 15 years, but it’s come to the point where we need to mainline this issue just as we have done with transportation and others,” said Conference of Mayors CEO and Executive Director Tom Cochran, stressing the importance of the role technology and

See TECHNOLOGY on page 9
Mayor Villaraigosa has appointed Phoenix Mayor Greg Stanton to Chair the Mayors Defense Transition Task Force. In announcing Mayor Stanton’s appointment to Chair, Mayor Villaraigosa said, “The nation’s cities will be affected, directly and indirectly, by the transition that is occurring in this nation’s approach to national defense. In this current climate of change, managing the human and economic impact of reduced military/industrial activity or a smaller military presence in and around cities must be recognized as a national goal that is shared by the Department of Defense and the local governments affected.”

In accepting this most important position, Phoenix Mayor Greg Stanton pledged his hard work along with the nation’s mayors on the challenges ahead. Mayor Stanton said, “We must never lose focus on how important it is to attract high wage jobs to Phoenix, while fiercely protecting the jobs we have. As Chair of this task force, I will work hard with mayors across the country to ensure that if cuts to the defense budget are made, they will be made in a thoughtful manner that protects jobs and our national security.”

We thank Mayor Villaraigosa for his vision and action to establish this task force at this critical time. No doubt, as we discuss the investments President Obama supports in the post Iraq/Afghanistan War era, certainly the defense facilities in and near our cities must be sites for future manufacturing and service industry sites. For example, there is no need for us to buy the batteries from Asia if we can transform the military sites into manufacturing sites. In Denver, they converted Stapleton Airport into a city as they opened the grand mega Denver Airport there.

We are most grateful for Mayor Stanton’s desire to serve, to work hard, and to help us create new approaches for this new era. Mayor Stanton brings new energy and new leadership to the pending defense transition, a transition that will cause chaos, upheaval and human misery unless we start now and work hard together with Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, his team, other top Administration officials, defense industry leaders, and equally non-defense corporate partners. With a unified approach, led by the bipartisan mayors of America, working with the federal government and the business sector, we can and we will build a better America.

On to Orlando
In Orlando, at our 80th Annual Meeting, June 13–16, we will bring the defense transition issue to the forefront. Conference President Villaraigosa has reached out to Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta and invited him to be with us in Orlando. Secretary Panetta is a friend of cities and mayors. Throughout his illustrious career, he has been a supporter of mayors and cities. We want to work with him as we go forward to ensure that the metropolitan economies of our nation that continue to drive this national economy out of the ’08 meltdown and the greatest recession to an even stronger national economy than before.

The mayors are ready to work on the challenge before us. Come to Orlando and be a part of helping us to influence decisions affecting your cities. It is most important for you, your city, your constituents and the nation for you to be in Orlando as we learn and move forward into this new era.

Please register now for our 80th Annual Meeting in Orlando, Florida, June 13–16. You can register online at: usmayors.org/registration or call Carol Edwards at 202-293-7330.
April 16, 2012

40 Year Old Clean Water Act Is Experiencing a Mid-Life Crisis: Threatens Overflow of Financial Burdens on Our Citizens, Communities

By Lima (OH) Mayor David Berger

As mayor of a northwest Ohio community for more than 20 years, I am proud to live in Lima, a great place to raise a family. We enjoy public and parochial schools of high quality. We have arts and recreational opportunities for the young and the not so young. Our citizens have immediate access to high quality medical care. Generally, our low cost of living makes it an easy place to live. You may be aware that Lima is the fictional location of the popular television series GLEE. But for years now we have been facing an enforcement action by EPA over Combined Sewer Overflows (CSOs) that is turning our Glee into glum!

When Is Approval Not Approval?
We worked with Ohio to develop a long-term control plan that was approved by them. Under that plan, we would have invested more than $60 million in our CSO and related systems. However, EPA decided to override that approval and stop any implementation. That was ten years ago.

Since then, my community has spent approximately $6 million on engineering studies and lawyers in an effort to develop an affordable set of alternatives to comply with Clean Water Act (CWA) standards and EPA policy interpretations of those standards. None of that money treated a drop of water! And, we are still far from establishing an affordable plan to reduce periodic sewer overflows – primarily because EPA is demanding unreasonable and expensive investments that our citizens cannot afford.

Lima, while a proud community with a high quality of life, is also a city of modest financial means. Our annual median income is roughly $30,525, with nearly one-third (30.3 percent) of persons living under the poverty threshold, ($22,313 in 2010 for a family of four). Another 20 percent of Lima households are under the median income level and close to the poverty threshold. Additionally, our demographic profile includes aging baby-boomers that comprise a substantial and growing class of fixed income seniors. Our low, moderate and fixed income households are particularly vulnerable to increasing costs of basic services.

The EPA and the state regulatory authorities define sewer overflows as violations of the CWA. Overflows are caused by rain. So, while mayors in the arid west often pray for rain, I pray that it doesn’t rain in Lima. That natural phenomenon results in more “violations” according to EPA, and, as the mayor, I am the de jure violator – not Mother Nature.

Not only am I made responsible for natural phenomenon, I am also subject to the confusing, and sometimes contradictory, messages coming from EPA at the regional and headquarters levels. While EPA leaders in Washington (DC) talk about basing regulatory decisions on science, most decisions are made in the context of enforcement actions taken by regional EPA staff that have little to do with science and much more to do with arbitrary policy. For example, the requirement to reduce CSO events to four or fewer is not a legal requirement contained in the CWA, nor is it based upon a scientific assessment of any receiving stream. It is a “presumptive” standard that the bureaucrats have decided should be enforced for all sizes of communities on all sizes of receiving streams. I guess the scientific principle here of “one size fits all” is a substitute for applying good science in the EPA Regions.

Is EPA’s 2 Percent Benchmark a Ceiling or Floor?
Lima would gladly eliminate or reduce sewer overflows if we had the financial capability to do so. The agency purports to rely on financial capability analyses to determine the affordability of sewer overflow control plans. Two metrics are typically considered. The first metric is a benchmark of two percent of median household income (MHI) that EPA originally suggested should not be exceeded by consent decree costs, and this figure is very prominently in affordability analysis. The second metric is a combination of factors: municipal bond rating; municipal debt per capita; unemployment rate; property tax collection rate; and, property tax revenue as a percentage of the market value of taxable property. This second metric is intended to give a more robust characterization of the financial capability of a city to comply with a control plan.

The two percent of MHI has been a particularly controversial metric. In a March 2011 meeting held in Washington (DC), a dozen cities met with EPA officials, and several city staff stated first-hand knowledge that some EPA Regional staff were setting two percent of MHI as a floor to go above, rather than a ceiling to stay below. Other city staff indicated that their financial capability analyses had been submitted to EPA for review, but they never received any feedback from the agency.

Two percent of MHI is for many communities a poor indicator of financial capability because it assumes that families in poverty or who are below the median income can afford even that amount. The EPA leverages their enforcement authority to pressure communities to develop policies to shelter those families. The unfortunate reality is that if we shelter the vulnerable 30 percent of families who are below the poverty threshold and the 20 percent of families with moderate incomes below the median income number by shifting costs to businesses that will cause employers to flee our communities and take their jobs with them. Currently there are around 2,200 firms in Lima, and the major employers have a global reach in transportation, chemicals and consumer non-durables. It makes little sense to try to shift additional major cost burdens to the businesses that hire our citizens only to see them shutter factories and stores. These businesses already share a large burden through the user rate system.

The long term control plans that EPA is demanding will have a burdensome and punishing impact on our most vulnerable families with low, moderate and fixed incomes, for the next twenty to thirty years. Diverting unreasonable investments to the overly costly control plans precludes the use of community resources for other necessary local investments. This is exactly where a federal agency not only interferes with local decision-making, but supplants the very ability of local elected officials to respond to the health, safety and welfare needs of their citizens in favor of the federal agency’s unilateral determinations.

But this does not have to be the only possible way to achieve the clean water goals we all seek.

Integrated Planning for All Water Obligations
I have personally participated in discussions and a formal workshop with EPA on the proposed new integrated planning policy. This policy is intended to help EPA, the state regulatory authorities and cities develop a process that allows cities to target investment of their limited resources to CWA sewer overflow and storm water requirements that yield the highest environmental benefits for the community, applying the maximum flexibility allowed by the CWA. Some of my fellow mayors have also participated in these discussions and workshops. We have repeatedly advised EPA to acknowledge that local resources are indeed limited, and that CWA regulations and Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA) regulations should all be considered together comprehensively, instead of forcing cities to comply with a plethora of regulations in stove-pipe fashion.

The dialogue with EPA has been valuable because it has made several things very clear. While EPA officials have stated they would like to be flexible where mandates are concerned, they also frankly assert that they cannot help communities as much as they would like to because their hands are tied by the requirements of the CWA. From a mayor’s perspective, if the Agency’s hands are tied, then the statute, the CWA, needs to be reformed. If EPA reaches the limits of flexibility and cities reach the limits of affordability, then Congress needs to remap the situation away from the collision course that we are now on.

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Lima (OH) Mayor David Berger

U.S. MAYOR  
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Conference of Mayors Establishes Mayors Defense Transition Task Force

Phoenix
Mayor Stanton Appointed Chair of New Panel

A task force of mayors that will focus on the profound effects that proposed changes in U.S. defense policy can be expected to have in America’s cities has been created by the Conference of Mayors Los Angeles Mayor Antonio R. Villaraigosa.

With the official end of the U.S. combat role in Iraq and the establishment of a timetable for withdrawal from Afghanistan, the U.S. military is in the process of transitioning from its large-scale traditional force to a smaller, more flexible and mobile force. In this year’s State of the Union address, President Obama described a “new defense strategy that ensures we maintain the finest military in the world, while saving nearly half a trillion dollars in our budget.”

Under the President’s FY 2013 budget proposal, defense spending over the next ten years would be $486.9 billion less than was planned in last year’s budget, with savings realized through “targeted reductions in force structure and modernization; reprioritization of key missions and the requirements that support them; and continued reforms and efficiencies in acquisition, management, and other business practices.” The budget also envisions “a properly aligned infrastructure from which to operate, deploy, and train,” and requests budget authority for the Department of Defense to conduct two additional rounds of base realignment and closure (BRAC), the first commencing in 2013.

And in the absence of Congressional action on federal spending before the end of this year, across-the-board cuts enacted last August under the Budget Control Act will take effect, resulting in defense program cuts of $54.7 billion each year through 2021.

In an April 9 letter to Phoenix Mayor Greg Stanton, who has been appointed Chair of the new group, Villaraigosa said, “The nation’s cities will be affected, directly and indirectly, by the transition that is occurring in this nation’s approach to national defense. In this current climate of change, managing the human and economic impact of reduced military/industrial activity or a smaller military presence in and around cities is an instance where a reforming update is needed.”

Villaraigosa also said the formation of this task force was “the Conference of Mayors’ response to the need to establish an open channel of communication on transition issues with the Office of the Secretary of Defense. I know that with your leadership, and working with the nation’s mayors, our CEO and Executive Director Tom Cochran and his staff as we move forward in this new era, we will be able to keep abreast of developments that may present both problems and opportunities to our cities’ workforces and economies.”

“We must never lose focus on how important it is to attract high-wage jobs to Phoenix, while fiercely protecting the jobs we have,” Stanton responded. “As chair of this task force, I will work hard with mayors across the country to ensure that if cuts to the Defense budget are made, they are done so in a thoughtful manner that protects jobs and our nation’s security.”

“We welcome Mayor Stanton as chair of the mayors defense transition task force,” said Cochran. “Mayor Stanton brings new energy and new leadership to the defense transition issue as we enter this new era. We look forward to his leadership as mayors around the country lead the charge to make cities more efficient and maximize opportunities for local workforces.”

The initial meeting of the Mayors Defense Transition Task Force will be held during the 80th annual meeting of the Conference of Mayors, June 13-16 in Orlando.

Mayors for Freedom to Marry Reaches 200-Member Mark

By Laura DeKoven Waxman

Homewood Borough (PA) Mayor Tim McGuire is the 200th mayor to join Mayors for Freedom to Marry.

The group was launched January 20 during The U.S. Conference of Mayors Winter Meeting in Washington (DC) by Conference of Mayors President Los Angeles Mayor Antonio R. Villaraigosa, New York City Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, Boston Mayor Thomas M. Menino, Houston Mayor Annise Parker, and San Diego Mayor Jerry Sanders – all co-chairs of the group. The co-chairs, along with many other mayors, Conference of Mayors CEO and Executive Director Tom Cochran, and Freedom to Marry National Campaign Director Marc Solano participated in a well-attended and well-covered press conference.

Villaraigosa has invited all mayors to join the effort. In a February 13 e-mail to mayors he wrote, “This critical coalition is working to win the freedom to marry in more states, grow the national majority for marriage, and end federal marriage discrimination.” A full list of the mayors in the group is available online at http://www.freedomtomarry.org/pages/mayors-for-the-freedom-to-marry. Mayors who wish to join and have not done so already may do so on that webpage as well.

At its 2009 annual meeting, the Conference of Mayors unanimously approved a resolution stating that: “The U.S. Conference of Mayors supports marriage equality for same-sex couples, and the recognition and extension of full equal rights to such unions, including family and medical leave, tax equity, and insurance and retirement benefits, and opposes the enshrinement of discrimination in the federal or state constitutions.”

Congress: Give Cities Grant Funding or Give Them Relief!

The current situation facing communities is neither productive nor sustainable. Congressional action is absolutely necessary: Congress needs to either appropriate sufficient grant funding to meet the CWA obligations as they are being enforced by EPA, or pass amendments to the CWA which provide adequate relief and flexibility for communities facing unaffordable mandates.
Creating Active, Livable Cities Through Play

By Jeannie Fanning

There are more than 20,000 parks within the nation’s 85 largest cities, according to the Trust for Public Land’s city park facts. What we do with city park resources to make them vital for citizens is a responsibility that is becoming more exciting with the advent of new options, and program resources for recreation and play.

Take for example the play space recently installed in Germantown, Tennessee, appropriately named “Everybody’s Treehouse.” The community in Germantown leveraged their partnership with PlayCore and GameTime to provide an environment that would bring the community together. The community playground provided children of all abilities an opportunity to play and interact with one another while setting an example for other communities across the country.

Riverdale Park was an ideal, though somewhat challenging site, utilized by the nearby Riverdale Elementary School, Baptist Rehabilitation Germantown hospital, and residential neighbors. This was a highly visible area where families and individuals gather, and an ideal location to encourage joint use by a variety of citizens and groups. GameTime, with input from key community stakeholders, designed and built a tree-themed playground based on PlayCore’s Me2 Inclusive Play Program then naturalized the space using their NatureGrounds Program, creating a unique learning environment that is as fun as it is educational.

Germantown Mayor Sharon Goldsworthy was grateful for the dedication of GameTime and PlayCore to building communities and enriching childhood through play and called the project “a playground that will delight and challenge youngsters [and the adults in their lives] for years to come in our community.”

Not only did “Everybody’s Treehouse” contribute to Germantown’s community-building goals, it was also a major contributor in winning the coveted City Livability Outstanding Achievement Award in 2011. Awarded at The U.S. Conference of Mayors Annual Meeting, the award recognizes leadership in developing and implementing programs that improve the quality of life in America’s cities, focusing on the leadership, creativity, and innovation demonstrated by the mayors of those cities. The award and the playground that helped win the award are examples of how a well-planned play environment can bring community groups together and positively affect the lives of people of all ages and abilities.

Goldsworthy graciously shared some of the credit for the award with GameTime and PlayCore by saying, “Everybody’s Tree House would simply not have happened without your vision and leadership. The design, extraordi-nary fulfillment and exhaustive persistence enabled so much of this playground.” GameTime and PlayCore Play Environments are available through the U.S. Communities program. Through the U.S. Communities program, cities and counties can access the best overall supplier government pricing while eliminating the need to go through a formal bid process, making the procurement process much simpler!
Census Bureau Chief Groves Resigns

By Larry Jones

U.S. Census Bureau Director Robert Groves announced on April 10 that he would be leaving the Bureau in late August to become the provost of Georgetown University in Washington (DC). Groves was nominated by President Obama to serve as census director in April 2009 and confirmed by the Senate in July that same year. He is praised by the leadership of both political parties in Congress for outstanding leadership in conducting a successful census count in 2010. In spite of the numerous challenges he faced—i.e. flaws in handheld computer, privacy concerns, immigrant language concerns and cost over-run concerns in the middle of a recession—he was praised for completing the 2010 census on time and $1.9 billion under budget.

Groves is widely regarded as a friend of the Conference of Mayors. He never missed an opportunity to meet with mayors to share information on the Bureau’s plans and to solicit their views on how best to achieve an accurate census count in 2010. In a press statement Groves said, “While I am honored by this rare personal and professional opportunity to help lead Georgetown to even greater heights than it already enjoys, I must tell you that I am enormously proud of the work we have accomplished together over the last three years.”

Working in academia is not new for Groves. Before his appointment as census director, he served as director of research at the University of Michigan and professor of research at the University of Maryland.

Allentown Accepts 1st Place Award for “Fruits and Veggies on the Move” Program

By Crystal Swann

Allentown Mayor Ed Pawlowski accepted a $120,000 check April 5 from The U.S. Conference of Mayors as the 1st place medium sized city winner of a 2012 Childhood Obesity Prevention Award. The press conference was held at the Destination Playground in Cedar Creek Parkway. Joining the mayor for the presentation were Pennsylvania Beverage Association President Joe Brake, Supply Chain Director of Nestle Waters North America Peter Rittenhouse; and Allentown Health Bureau Nutrition & Physical Activity Manager Tina Amato.

“Allentown is a city that is very committed to reducing childhood obesity,” said Pawlowski. “Over the last few years, we have taken considerable strides to improve the overall health of our residents and especially our young children.”

The fruit and vegetable mobile began with a $2500 donation from Greater Lehigh Valley Independent Practice Association. Magnets were purchased with Community Development Block Grant funds to convert a city truck into the fruit and vegetable mobile. Local grocers like Elias, sold fruit and vegetables to the city at a reasonable cost. They even washed and put the produce into baskets. The fruit and vegetable mobile was loaded-up and taken to playgrounds and other sites to deliver the healthy snacks to city children.

Pawlowski said, “Our Parks and Recreation Department, our health bureau and the school district are partnering everyday on increasing physical activity, improving nutrition, and making good choices for healthier lifestyles to prevent chronic disease. We are serious about reducing childhood obesity in Allentown. I guarantee you that we are going to put this award to great use.”

According to Amato, part of the funds will be used to better equip the fruit and vegetable mobile.

The grant program was the result of a partnership between the Conference of Mayors and the American Beverage Association. A total of $445,000 was awarded to six communities. “We are pleased to be part of the effort,” said Brake. The ABA is also doing its part to provide healthy drinks to schools all across the country.”

Nestle Waters is donating bottled water to be served along with fruits and vegetables this summer.

At the conclusion of the news conference, the city’s fruit and vegetable mobile served fruit and vegetables and Nestle Water to students and pre-school students from the Lehigh Valley Children’s Centers South Mountain Center, a STAR 4 PS designated high quality center.
Mayors Landrieu, Villaraigosa Invite You to Join Them for World Cultural Economic Forum

May 2–4 in New Orleans

Los Angeles Mayor Antonio R. Villaraigosa, President

New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu

Registration: Visit the World Cultural Economic Forum website at: wcefneworleans.com

For additional registration information, contact Sarah Robertson at wcef@nola.org.

For meeting information, contact Tom McClimon at mcclimon@usmayors.org or Jocelyn Bogen at jbogen@usmayors.org.

LAST CHANCE to REGISTER NOW!

International Attendees include Mayors, Ambassadors, and Minister’s of Culture from:

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- Hungary
- Lesotho
- Lithuania
- Mali
- Mexico
- Nicaragua
- Israel
- Netherlands
- St. Kitts and Nevis
- South Africa
- Trinidad & Tobago
- Turkey

Agenda Highlights

Wednesday, May 2nd

Welcome Reception & Dinner hosted by Mayor Mitchell J. Landrieu

Enjoy a reception and formal dinner by a sampling of New Orleans’ finest chefs and with a taste of the one-of-a-kind music and traditional hospitality of one of America’s greatest cultural cities.

Thursday, May 3rd

Opening Ceremony of the World Cultural Economic Forum

The Opening Ceremony of the World Cultural Economic Forum will include a musical performance, the formal announcement of all dignitaries, and opening remarks from Mayor Mitch Landrieu (New Orleans, LA) and Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa (Los Angeles, CA).

Pleasary Panel: “The Influence of Culture on Global Change”

Government leaders and policy experts explore how culture both influences and is effected by global events of the 21st century.

Press Conference

Breakout Sessions

(1) Cultural Economy: An Engine for Prosperous Cities

Learn how collecting and using data from your city’s cultural economy can impact jobs and create economic growth.

(2) Supporting a Creative Workforce

Discover new tools and strategies that municipalities use to create a strong cultural workforce.

(3) Culture as a Tool for Increased Quality of Life & Quality of Place

Explore the use of culture in municipal planning and design as a method to create vibrant cities.

For The Record: A Live Global Town Hall

Join international and domestic mayors in an unprecedented live broadcast conversation around cultural economy themes.

A Unique Party Only New Orleans Can Host

Attending a private reception featuring performances by New Orleans’ most renowned musicians.

Friday, May 4th

Briefing on the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival presented by Shell

Receive a high-level overview of the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival presented by Shell – an annual celebration of the music, food and culture of New Orleans with an economic impact of over $200 million.

Visit the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival presented by Shell

Take in the complete culture of New Orleans on full display and experience firsthand performances by the Zac Brown Band, Marcia Ball, DelFayos Marsalis’ Uptown Orchestra, and over sixty musicians, food from chefs and restaurants around Louisiana, and cultural exhibitions of the many components of New Orleans’ international heritage.

Note: The New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival presented by Shell ends at 7PM, but WCEF attendees are free to leave the Festival at any time.
By Laura DeKoven Waxman

Conference of Mayors President Los Angeles Mayor Antonio R. Villaraigosa and Conference of Mayors Vice President Philadelphia Mayor Michael A. Nutter were among seven mayors in Washington (DC) April 2 for a Summit on Preventing Youth Violence. The meeting, convened by the U.S. Department of Justice’s National Forum on Youth Violence Prevention, provided an opportunity for the six cities now in the Forum to share information on what they have accomplished and what remains to be done.

The six forum cities are Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Memphis, Salinas, and San Jose. In his remarks, Attorney General Eric Holder announced that the Administration plans to add four new cities to the forum this year.

Villaraigosa brought greetings from the Conference of Mayors and briefed participants on his anti-gang initiative in Los Angeles. In 2007 he established the Mayor’s Office of Gang Reduction and Youth Development (GRYD), a single office to oversee the implementation of a comprehensive gang reduction strategy, and focused resources on those communities most impacted by violence.

“Above all, we would take a holistic approach that prioritized improving communities with proven, data-driven practices,” Villaraigosa said. “Today, Los Angeles is the only city with an around-the-clock incident response program. Whatever the time, a staff member from our GRYD office responds to each and every gang shooting. They work with intervention workers and the LAPD to counsel victims and to take the critical steps to stop retaliation.”

He also described his Summer Night Lights program, which over the last four years has created evening recreation and entertainment in city parks that have been notorious as havens for gang activity. “Parks once known for crime and violence have been transformed into places of community and peace,” he commented. “Gang-related crimes in parks with Summer Night Lights events have declined by nearly a third.”

Nutter Decrees Lack of National Attention to Youth Violence

Nutter participated in a conversation with Casey Family Programs President and Chief Executive Officer Dr. William C. Bell on the high incidence of violence among young people in many cities and what must be done to reduce it. Nutter, who termed this violence domestic terrorism, decried the lack of attention paid to it, and asked, “What is our domestic terrorism response?”

He suggested that tainted food gets more attention than young people killing each other: “If there were five bad bags of spinach on the shelf somewhere, someone would put out a national alert. Every bag would be snatched off the shelves until someone figured out where they came from, what was going on, and there would be a national investigation. There is no national investigation about this issue – that black people are killing black people all across the United States of America,” he continued.

He called for “a serious conversation, not only about Trayvon Martin – and I won’t take anything away from that discussion – but the thousands of people who are killed all across the United States of America – black, white, Latino, Asian, anybody else – [it] is a serious national issue that deserves a serious national discussion. This is what I’m going to be doing in one way or another for the rest of my life,” he commented.

Other mayors present were Rahm Emanuel from Chicago, Chuck Reed from San Jose, Dennis Donohue from Salinas, Judith Kennedy from Lynn, and Judy Kennedy from Newburgh.

Administration officials in addition to Holder who addressed the Summit included Senior Advisor to the President Valerie Jarrett, Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius, Housing and Urban Development Secretary Shaun Donovan, Education Secretary Arne Duncan, and White House Office of National Drug Control Policy Director Gil Kerlikowske.
innovation play in cities.

Also joining the call was Chris Vein from the White House who serves as Deputy United States Chief Technology Officer for Government Innovation. Vein previously served as the Chief Information Officer for the city and county of San Francisco, and took the opportunity on the call to share his thoughts on how cities can plan a strong role in being leaders in this area and work with the federal government in this process.

One such area for the White House is in regards to open data. Vein mentioned, “One example that I’d like to highlight is looking at data as an asset and how we can release that data and really entice not only entrepreneurs within government but outside government to take that data and create new products, services and economic value.”

This open data project, dubbed “cities.data.gov” is the foundation for which citizens and government can build apps for phones, tablets, and web sites that can solve challenges or enhance quality of life.

The task force hopes that technology and innovation in the sciences can help benefit cities in multiple sectors, including health care, agriculture, and energy. One example came from task force member Gainesville Mayor Craig Lowe who said, “Here in Gainesville, we’ve increased photovoltaic [solar cell] energy 3 times. There are lots of opportunities here and with support, we can be a rising tide that lifts all boats.”

The task force’s goals, no matter where the innovation happens, come back to how cities can save money, time, and enhance quality of life. “It’s about all of us being asked to make more with less,” said Lee. “Technology and innovation can be used to make our cities that much more vibrant and sustainable.”

The next meeting of the task force will take place in Orlando at the 80th Annual Meeting June 13-16.
Philadelphia Mayor Nutter to House Committee: Mayors Oppose FEMA Grant Consolidation

By Laura DeKoven Waxman

Conference of Mayors Vice President Philadelphia Mayor Michael A. Nutter told members of the House Homeland Security Committee March 20 that, “Mayors and other local officials across the nation have serious concerns” with FEMA’s proposal to consolidate homeland security grant programs. “While they may not be perfect, we strongly support the existing menu of homeland security programs,” Nutter commented. “They are the product of years of work by Congress, the Administration, state and local governments, and first responders. Frankly we cannot understand why FEMA proposes to throw away these programs in such a wholesale manner.”

The hearing was called by the Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Communications, which is chaired by Florida Representative Gus Bilirakis, to examine FEMA’s administration of current homeland security grant programs along with its proposal to create a new consolidated $1.54 billion National Preparedness Grant Program that would replace the current suite of programs.

Although the details of that proposal are still being fleshed out, it appears that the new program would be a mix of formula grants to the states intended to sustain current activities including some Urban Area Security Initiative grants, and competitive grants to states and regions for specific policy areas, including critical infrastructure, counterterrorism, and transportation. The proposal, which would require legislation, would eliminate current separate programs including state homeland security grants, Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI), transportation and infrastructure protection (rail, port, bus), urban search and rescue, medical surge grants (MMRS), citizen corps, Operation StoneGarden, and the pre-disaster mitigation fund.

It is not clear that the current requirement in the formula grants program that states pass through a portion of the funds to local governments, as is currently the case under the State Homeland Security Grant Program (SHSGP), would remain. It also is not clear that the requirement that a portion of the funds be dedicated to law enforcement terrorism prevention activities, as is currently the case under both SHSGP and UASI, would continue.

Nutter introduced into the record a joint letter to the Committee from 12 groups representing local elected officials, emergency managers, major city police chiefs, sheriffs, and the major fire service organizations. That letter, which expresses concern with the FEMA consolidation proposal, is reprinted on page 11.

Members of the Committee expressed concern with the proposal as well:

“I don’t believe, more than a month after the President’s budget was released, we have received sufficiently detailed information about the proposed National Preparedness Grant Program,” commented Bilirakis. In particular he asked if high-risk urban areas, port authorities, and transit agencies would be able to apply directly for funding.

“Before this government undertakes such a radical change in funding for these vital programs, Congress must ask some questions,” said full Committee Ranking Member, Bennie Thompson of Mississippi. “Members must ask about the wisdom of forcing port and transit officials to compete for the same grant money. Members must examine the effect of asking public health providers and local law enforcement to vie for a shrinking pot of grant money. State and local officials, first responders and first preventers must have an opportunity to tell how they will be affected by these cuts,” he continued.

Subcommittee Ranking Member Laura Richardson of California commented that, “The FY 2013 grants consolidation proposal gives states full discretion to administer grants based on a competitive and individual project based approach. I am concerned that these drastic changes will negatively impact the preparedness capabilities of our state, territory, tribal and local partners.”

Conference Call with Secretary Napolitano

Nutter, Houston Mayor Annise Parker, Chair of the Conference’s Criminal and Social Justice Committee, Conference of Mayors Second Vice President Mesa Mayor Scott Smith and Conference of Mayors CEO and Executive Director Tom Cochran participated in a conference call on March 19 with Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano to discuss the mayors’ concerns with the proposed consolidation. Commenting on the call, Nutter said of the Secretary: “She listened to our concerns and, I believe, she understood them.”

In a letter to Napolitano, Parker and Cochran said that they “look forward to working with your Department, and FEMA in particular, in this effort” and “are prepared to react to the Department’s proposals, offer some of our own, and identify examples of innovative approaches which are working.” “Our goal is the same as yours, to make sure that the nation’s homeland security programs include and respond to the needs of the entire nation, including its cities and metropolitan areas.”
Text of Local Government/First Responder Letter Registering Concern with FEMA Grant Consolidation Proposal

March 16, 2012

Dear Mr. King, Mr. Thompson, Mr. Bilinkis, and Ms. Richardson:

We are pleased to submit this letter for the record of your March 20, 2012, hearing on Ensuring the Transparency, Efficiency, and Effectiveness of Homeland Security Grants.

Everyone agrees that we should spend our homeland security dollars wisely, efficiently, and effectively. It is not, however, clear that we are spending our dollars in the best way or that we are receiving the best results for our investments. For example, it is not clear whether the provinces and municipalities are using the full range of tools and resources available to them to protect their communities.

We, therefore, believe that it is time to consider whether the current model of homeland security grant programs is working as intended. The current model is overly complex and fragmented, with many different programs and funding streams competing for the same dollars. This can lead to duplication, waste, and inefficiency. It also makes it difficult for communities to prioritize their needs and allocate resources effectively.

We urge you to consider the following recommendations:

1. **Increase Transparency**: The Congress should require that all federal homeland security grants be publicly announced and awarded in a transparent manner. This will ensure that the public knows how the money is being spent and that the grants are being awarded based on merit.

2. **Streamline Funding Processes**: The federal government should work with local governments to streamline the funding processes and reduce the burden of paperwork and administrative tasks. This will allow local officials to focus on their core mission of protecting their communities.

3. **Enhance Collaboration**: The federal government should encourage collaboration between local governments and other stakeholders, such as private sector partners, non-profits, and community groups. This will help ensure that local governments have the resources and support they need to effectively respond to emergencies.

4. **Promote Innovation**: The federal government should provide funding and support for innovative solutions and technologies that can help local governments improve their response capabilities. This will help ensure that local governments are prepared to respond to a wide range of threats.

We urge you to consider these recommendations and take action to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of homeland security grants. Thank you for your attention to this important issue.

Sincerely,

[Signatures]

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Conference of Mayors Vice President Philadelphia Mayor Michael A. Nutter introduced into the record this joint letter to the Committee from 12 groups listed in the letter.
Local Government Amicus Brief Urges Supreme Court to Declare Key Portions of Arizona Immigration Law Unconstitutional

By Laura DeKoven Waxman

In preparation for the Supreme Court’s consideration of the constitutionality of Arizona’s controversial immigration law, 43 cities and counties, The U.S. Conference of Mayors, and the National League of Cities joined together in an amicus brief urging the Court to uphold the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals ruling, which upheld the Arizona District Court’s injunction of certain portions of the law from taking effect. The brief was prepared by officials in the Santa Clara County Counsel’s office and filed by the county on March 23.

In a March 13 alert to mayors, Conference of Mayors President Los Angeles Mayor Antonio R. Villaraigosa invited mayors to sign onto the amicus brief being prepared by Santa Clara County. “The Court’s ruling on this case could have far-reaching consequences for our country’s local jurisdictions,” Villaraigosa said. “Given this, it is of the utmost importance that the court fully appreciates the view of cities and counties regarding this historic case.”

The local government brief in Arizona v. United States argues that “the State of Arizona has created a sweeping state immigration enforcement scheme that threatens the ability of local law enforcement agencies to protect public safety” and urged the court to find the enjoined provisions unconstitutional.

The brief explains that the provisions covered by the injunction would:

• “require local law enforcement officers to investigate individuals’ immigration status, detain all arrestees until their immigration status is verified, and enforce state laws that criminalize both the failure to carry alien registration documents and any attempt by an unauthorized alien to apply for or perform work in Arizona”
• “authorize[s] law enforcement officers to make warrantless arrests whenever an officer has probable cause to believe that an individual has committed a public offense that makes the person removable from the United States”
• “interfere with those [law enforcement] agencies’ primary function: protection of public safety, suggesting that if these provisions are allowed to take effect, local law enforcement agencies in Arizona will be forced to prioritize the enforcement of federal civil immigration law over significant threats to public safety occurring within their jurisdictions, thereby reducing the capacity of local law enforcement agencies to detect, investigate, and prosecute serious criminal activity”
• “instruct local law enforcement agencies to enforce Arizona’s immigration scheme through means that are unconstitutional, vague, impractical, and costly”
• “wrongly suggest to the public that the enforcement of federal civil immigration law is the responsibility of local officials, and that basic constitutional principles do not apply when those officials are enforcing these laws.”

Finally, the brief warns that “if laws such as S.B. 1070 are allowed to take effect, immigrants — whether they are naturalized citizens, lawful permanent residents, visa holders, or undocumented individuals — will become deeply distrustful of local law enforcement officials. Such distrust will have long-term deleterious effects on the ability of local governments nationwide to protect the health and safety of all residents within their jurisdictions.”

The cities and counties which signed onto the Santa Clara County amicus brief are:

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80th Annual Conference of Mayors
Orlando • June 13-16

Registration is now open at usmayors.org.

Preview the draft agenda online.

Resolutions submission deadline for member mayors:
May 14 at 5:00 pm EDT

Los Angeles Mayor Antonio R. Villaraigosa, President
Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer, Host

Siemens
New Report Offers Constructive Alternatives to Criminalization of Homelessness

The U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) released April 09 a new report, Searching Out Solutions: Constructive Alternatives to Criminalization (SOS), outlining alternatives for communities who implement local measures that criminalize “acts of living.”

In response to the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act, USICH and the Access to Justice Initiative of the U.S. Department of Justice, with support from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, convened a summit on the development of constructive alternatives to the criminalization of homelessness. The summit participants shared information on effective and promising practices and are improving the lives of individuals experiencing homelessness and the larger community, said USICH Executive Director Barbara Poppe. “In today’s economic climate, it is important for state, county, and local entities to invest in programs that work rather than spend money on activities that are unlikely to achieve the desired result.”

• SOS identifies three solutions, examples of specific strategies and interventions, and their successful implementation in communities across the country.
• The creation of comprehensive and seamless systems of care. In an effort to address gaps in service delivery, many local organizations partner with other service providers and government programs to combine housing and services that are supported by community-wide planning. These systems of care enable long-term reductions in street homelessness and connect individuals with benefits and services that improve stability.
• Collaboration between law enforcement and behavioral health and social service providers. Collaboration between service providers and law enforcement regarding outreach to individuals and specialized crisis intervention training can limit the number of arrests for non-violent offenses. This partnership can also help link individuals experiencing street homelessness with supportive housing and services to help move individuals off the street permanently.
• Alternative justice system strategies.

Cochran Urges Federal Task Force to Make Strong Gun Safety Recommendations

Last fall, the Justice Department announced the establishment of the Task Force on Children Exposed to Violence as part of the Attorney General’s Defending Childhood Initiative, a project that addresses the epidemic levels of exposure to violence faced by the nation’s children. In response to a request from the Justice Department, Conference of Mayors CEO and Executive Director Tom Cochran submitted testimony to the Task Force April 12. His statement urges the task force to include strong recommendations relating to gun safety in its report to the Attorney General. Below is the full text of Cochran’s statement:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony to the Task Force on Children Exposed to Violence. I write on behalf of America’s mayors to highlight one issue that can have a significant positive effect on reducing the violence, which children face – the need to strengthen our gun laws through common sense legislation, which will make our communities safer for our children and reduce their exposure to guns.

According to a report published just last month by the Children’s Defense Fund, 2,947 children and teens died from guns in the United States in 2008 and 2,793 died in 2009 – 5,730 over the two year period, which CDF points out is “one child or teen every three hours, eight every day, 55 every week for two years.” CDF reports further that “six times as many children and teens—34,587—suffered nonfatal gun injuries as gun deaths in 2008 and 2009. This is equal to one child or teen every 31 minutes, 47 every day, and 331 children and teens every week.

We know that strengthening our gun laws will not prevent all of these deaths or injuries. We also know, however, that it can help to reduce these shameful and tragic numbers. Reasonable changes in law and regulation would go a long way toward protecting children, keeping guns out of the hands of criminals, and providing law enforcement with tools that will help them solve crimes. Among the changes we advocate:

1) A strengthened, effective ban on military-style assault weapons, such as AK-47’s, and their component parts, including high-capacity magazines, must be reinstated.

2) Common sense gun legislation, such as that advocated by Mayors Against Illegal Guns, co-chaired by New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Boston Mayor Thomas Menino, must be enacted. Such legislation should close the gun show loophole, keep guns out of the hands of terrorists, and no longer permit gun dealers whose licenses are revoked to conduct fire sales.

3) Anyone purchasing a firearm in the United States must be required to go through a background check, and states must be required to submit records, including those involving persons with serious mental health problems and those who are drug abusers, to the National Instant Check System.

4) Legislation should be enacted which would limit the number of guns a person may purchase in a single transaction or in a month or other specified period of time.

5) Law enforcement agencies’ access to gun trace data should not be limited in any way by either state or federal law – for example, by any version of the so-called Tiahrt amendment. The U.S. Conference of Mayors has had strong gun control policy for 45 years. This is because mayors are committed to doing everything in their power to protect their cities’ residents, especially children, from harm. And mayors believe that there is no greater threat to public safety and to the safety of children in particular, than the threat of illegal guns.

We urge the Task Force to include strong recommendations relating to gun safety in its report to the Attorney General.
Cities Can Take Steps to Ensure Competitive, Sustainable Benefits

By Jeannie Fanning

Mayors in cities across the country face unprecedented challenges in providing competitive benefits for city employees while still controlling costs. Obstacles such as revenue decreases of 22 percent from 2008 to 2009 and increased public scrutiny of government spending add to strain. Luckily, cities have access to many proven solutions that can help them control and even reduce costs while continuing to offer a strong benefits package for their dedicated employees.

Colonial Life’s new white paper, “Preserve and Protect: How Public Sector Employers Can Provide Excellent Benefits While Controlling Costs” uses proprietary and industry research and case studies to explain the reasons for the growing health care costs and how to bring awareness of these cost containment strategies to mayors and their cities. The top five strategies examined are wellness initiatives, Section 125 participation, benefits communication and education, using employee paid voluntary benefits, and conducting a dependent verification.

Cities and other public sector entities that implemented strategies such as these report significant savings in their employee health care benefits. More than half — 55 percent — of participants in a government financial officers study saved at least six percent, and 40 percent of them saved more than ten percent. Other studies show employer return on investment for wellness initiatives ranging from $3 to $6 for every dollar spent.

In partnership with The U.S. Conference of Mayors, Colonial Life is working to bring awareness of this cost containment strategies to mayors and their cities. The top five strategies examined are wellness initiatives, Section 125 participation, benefits communication and education, using employee paid voluntary benefits, and conducting a dependent verification.

The Colonial Life white paper illustrates how cities and other entities can save money and preserve the value of their benefits packages by carefully selecting the most effective combination of strategies for their situations and needs, including enlist the often-free support of qualified benefits providers. By considering all the aspects of a city, such as the number of city employees, political environment, cost management goals, impact on employee health, and access to care, mayors and other city leaders can select from a range of cost saving options while educating and providing great benefits for their employees.

“Focusing on the right cost-saving measures could have a significant impact on the bottom line while minimizing the impact on employees,” said Conference of Mayors CEO and Executive Director Tom Cochran. “Thorough implementation of strategies appropriate for each employer can help them continue to offer a stable benefits package in a more financially sustainable way.”

The complete white paper is available in Colonial Life’s online newsroom at ColonialLife.com. For more information on how these strategies could help your city’s employee benefits, contact Kathryn Kretschmer-Weyland with the Conference of Mayors at 301-460-5251 or e-mail kweyland@usmayors.org, or contact Jeff Bean at 202-446-8140 or e-mail jbean@usmayors.org.
Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer has won a third full term as mayor. Dyer received 58 percent of the vote April 3 against three challengers, and thus avoided a run-off.

Dyer said his priorities for the new term include, “Making sure we complete SunRail, the performing Arts Center, making sure we find a way to finance the Citrus Bowl, making sure we keep crime low, making sure we keep the city the most financially stable city in the whole state of Florida,” according to press reports.


Neighborhood nook reopens in Pembroke Pines — and the mayor is the boss

By Eileen Soler, Posted on Tuesday, April 3, 2012

Pembroke Pines’ mayor is moonlighting — as a co-owner in a popular neighborhood nook.

For years, Pembroke Pines Mayor Frank Ortis has held court at a landmark restaurant in his city. It’s where he met and courted his wife. It’s where he went every day for breakfast, sitting in his favorite booth along the back wall. It’s where he planned his winning elections.

But on Tuesday, he had a new experience there: Greeting his customers.

“We’re having a reunion today,” Ortis said, welcoming people to the opening day of The Mayor’s Cafe, formerly known as the Bagel Bar West.

The restaurant, at 1677 Hiatus Rd., had been closed since July 2011, leaving its longtime customers bereft.

“We were left with no ‘place’ to go,” recalled longtime customer Bonnie Yaffe.

Neither Ortis nor good friend Lewis Nadel could bear the demise of the neighborhood nook where bagels, corned beef and knishes were served with hefty portions of friendship, laughs and conversation.

So they teamed up to buy the place.

Both owners live just a hop, skip and jump away. Nadel in Cooper City and Ortis a few blocks north of the restaurant.

“The mayor used to live within walking distance. Now it’s within running distance — he can’t get here every day fast enough,” Nadel said.

The favorite orders of the day were “The Mayor’s Skillet” made with eggs any style over home fries, ham, peppers, onions and melted cheese and “The Big Louie” — turkey, corned beef, cole slaw and mustard on rye.

Ortis and Nadel have big shoes to fill. Previous owners Russell and Lois Kwitkin created a homey kitchen ambience that customers compared to the television bar “Cheers” — where everybody knows your name and a cast of characters traded insults and backslaps and built life-long relationships.

Customers from senators to housewives were treated the same. No one was spared and everyone played along.

A 1999 article in the Miami Herald recalled Russell Kwitkin being compared to the sitcom’s Sam Malone: “a rough, tough cream puff” who delivered jokes as easily as he did chicken soup to sick customers.

In 2005, when Lois Kwitkin died of breast cancer, the community mourned. Kwitkin sold the restaurant and two others tried running the place, but it just wasn’t the same.

But that was forgotten Tuesday as a steady stream of customers hugged and chatted from the time they entered until they left full of matzo ball soup, hot pastrami on rye and promises to come back.

“We’re living old memories and making new ones,” Barbara Ortis, the mayor’s wife, said.

Henry Koppel was so happy the place was open again, he came to eat twice. He was among the first served after doors opened at 6:30 a.m. His first meal? A lox omelette with a side of potatoes and a bagel. His second meal? Another bagel with a schmear plus coffee.

“It’s a very exciting day for all of us,” Koppel said, during lunch with friends from a nearby retirement community.

“From now on we can pop in to meet whenever we want.”

Mana Paduano was perfectly pleased with her white fish salad on a bialy.

“Everyone has been looking forward to this day for months,” Paduano said.

Sherry Cohn described the split pea soup as “the best ever.”

Not bad for two guys whose day jobs are running a city and being a security specialist.

But Nadel said they’re cut out to run the place.

“We both felt we had tremendous experience in the restaurant business,” Nadel said. “We both eat out a lot.”
By Pat Harris

Thick steaks sizzling on a charcoal grill. People milling about with smiles on their faces. All of this sounds like a typical backyard barbecue. But it was far from typical, as it was in a Kuwait desert and the sizzling steaks were accompanied by the sounds of America’s fighting forces. And Rochester (MN) Mayor Ardell Brede was squarely at the helm of the grill for this unique project to support our troops and their families.

This past February, Brede joined forces with the Minnesota-based Serving Our Troops organization to send a unique message of support to our troops and their families in the form of a 12-ounce steak from home. Brede and nearly 50 volunteers traveled over 7,000 miles to Kuwait and served up 12,000 steaks to 2,700 Minnesota National Guard soldiers of the 1st Brigade, 34th Infantry Division, along with thousands of soldiers from other states. Back in Saint Paul, over 4,000 family members also enjoyed steaks, entertainment, and a host of fun activities for families.

The entire event – both at home and overseas – was linked via live international video to create an all important “dinner with the family.”

And that is the motto of Serving Our Troops: “It’s a simple thing, dinner with the family.” Saint Paul to Kuwait, the ninth project from Serving Our Troops, was just that – a shared meal with the family and a nonpolitical message of support to our soldiers serving in harm’s way.

Founded in 2004, Serving Our Troops is an all-volunteer effort organized by local citizens and businesses with a threefold mission: serve a fabulous meal to soldiers and families, send a message of support, and promote awareness of the Minnesota National Guard’s deployments. With over 75,000 steaks served, the message has been clear.

This Minnesota deployment represents citizen soldiers from over 500 Minnesota communities. Colonel Eric Kerska, the Commander of the Minnesota unit in Kuwait, is currently a Battalion Chief for Rochester’s Fire Department. Kerska personally invited Brede to join the Serving Our Troops contingent.

Many other Minnesota mayors also served up their support. While Brede was grilling in Kuwait, over 30 mayors joined Saint Paul Mayor Chris Coleman on stage in Saint Paul to offer a live greeting to families at home and soldiers overseas.

Brede is no stranger to supporting our nation’s soldiers. He participated in the 2008 Serving Our Troops project, Rochester to Kosovo, he has visited our soldiers overseas, and he has been a champion of showing how cities honor our heroes, including efforts for Rochester’s Veteran’s Memorial and the Honor Flights for World War II veterans.

But the Serving Our Troops project was the first time he was able to flip steaks for the soldiers. “Serving Our Troops represents the support of many communities. The steak itself, cooked to order of course, is a 12-ounce message to our soldiers that was heard loud and clear. It was an honor to be a part of it,” said Brede.

For more information on Serving Our Troops, visit our website at www.ServingOurTroops.com. It’s a simple thing, dinner with the family.

Pat Harris is a former Saint Paul City Council Member, currently with RBC Global Asset Management. Harris is one of the founders of Serving Our Troops, along with John Marshall from Xcel Energy and a host of local businesses and citizens.