Census Budget Threatened; AAG Supports Full Funding

In what seems to be a recurring theme each year on Capitol Hill, the U.S. Census Bureau is again facing a potential funding shortfall as the agency’s appropriations bill works its way through House and Senate negotiations. In recent years, congressional appropriators have come through with necessary funding for the bureau, owing in large part to the persistent support of the AAG and other statistical organizations which grasp the bureau’s value to the public policy process and a wide range of demographic data collection and research efforts.

Earlier this year, the Bush administration requested $878 million for the bureau’s 2007 budget, but as the appropriations bills that fund Census programs were drafted separately by each house of Congress, the Senate included only $828 million for bureau and the House only $815.7 million. The bureau’s ultimate fate will be decided by the House and Senate negotiators charged with crafting a compromise bill. Complicating matters for Census supporters is that the bureau is lumped into a large appropriations bill with several other federal agencies, including the Departments of Justice and State and other programs administered by the Department of Commerce.

A spokesman for Sen. Richard Shelby (R-AL), who chairs the Senate panel that determines census funding, made just that point, explaining that the senator believes the legislation “strikes an important balance among the needs for all the critical programs funded under this bill.” On the House side, the outlook was a bit rosier, as Shelby’s counterpart, Rep. Frank Wolf (R-VA) asserted that the proposed cuts to census funding “would be devastating,” and convened a hearing July 27 “to make the case publicly how important this is.”

AAG Executive Director Douglas Richardson sent a letter on August 7 to Shelby, Wolf, and the top Democrats involved in the negotiations, urging the members of Congress to provide at least the $878 million figure to the bureau for FY 2007. A key point of the letter centered on the importance of the bureau’s flagship American Community Survey, a program designed to provide year-by-year data on communities of all sizes and replace the decennial census long form. It stated, “From the perspective of the research community, the ACS promises to be a great resource for geographically-detailed information on a large range of social and economic issues of policy concern. Moreover, the ACS improves on the long form by providing geographically-detailed information on key social and economic measures annually instead of every ten years. Without the ACS, the ability to systematically gauge geographical, social, and economic conditions in most counties and metropolitan areas will be severely limited.”

The ACS could be severely threatened if the bureau does not receive funding at or near the administration’s request.

Companion Geography Education Bill Introduced in House

On May 25, a bipartisan group of representatives introduced the Teaching Geography is Fundamental Act as H.R. 5519. The legislation is identical to the Senate companion (S. 1376 – see previous “Washington Monitor” columns for background information) save for the fact that it would allocate the $50 million specified for geography education programs over six years rather than five.

While it is certainly a promising development that both houses of Congress are now formally considering legislation to support geography education, it remains likely that the bills will be stalled in congressional committees for the rest of the year. With the 2006 elections looming, members of Congress plan to spend much of the time between now and November 7 in their districts campaigning. The best hope for the legislation will probably come next year, when the new Congress begins the arduous task of reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, better known as No Child Left Behind. We will keep you apprised of any developments.

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including Iquique and Antofagasta. A four-day post-conference field trip will focus on Central Chile, the cultural nucleus of the country, and will include visits to coastal Valparaiso and the capital of Santiago.

Advance conference registration, which includes participation in the opening reception, two lunches, and a Chilean-style barbeque social, will be $195. Advance registration for students is $95. Following the early registration deadline of March 16, 2007, registration costs will increase by $50 in each category. A variety of local housing accommodations in La Serena have been arranged, ranging in cost from $40-$80 per night, and students will have the option of staying at local youth hostels for as little as $15 per night.

Additional conference arrangements are currently being finalized. Complete conference information is at www.geo.txstate.edu/grosvenor/index.html and www.aag.org/events/Chile.