Obama Signs FY 2009 Omnibus; Earmark Rules Will Apply Going Forward

On March 11, President Obama’s stroke of the pen finally put an end to the FY 2009 appropriations process – a job that should have been completed by September 30, 2008! The Democratic Congress at that time, however, found itself in a stalemate over federal spending and passed a temporary resolution that allowed for completion of the process this year.

In signing the massive omnibus bill, which provides spending levels for hundreds of federal agencies and accounts, the president used the opportunity to chide Congress for the practice of earmarking – appropriated funds that do not have to go through the peer-review process or face federal contracting standards. In response, the House adopted new rules that will require any future earmark to face executive agency review – and potentially a competitive bidding process as well. Only time will tell if Congress is willing to live up to these new standards.

Getting back to the substance of the omnibus, the bill provides millions in new research funding, including an increase of $363 million (5.9 percent) for the National Science Foundation (NSF). This amount, which takes the Foundation's total regular budget up to $6.5 billion, is on top of the $3 billion in funding provided in the stimulus legislation.

Obama Cabinet Settles in; Duncan Stakes Out Key Priorities

With Barack Obama now past the 50-day mark of his presidency, many of his top appointees are in place and have begun setting key agenda items for their agencies. In the next few columns, we will focus on some of the individuals that are of importance to geography – beginning this month with a look at Education.

Department of Education: Arne Duncan

Duncan was confirmed as Secretary of Education on Inauguration Day and has been in place with the president since day one. For the previous seven-plus years, Duncan served as CEO of the Chicago school system, so he is intimately familiar with local-level implementation of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act and other key federal education programs. And he brings the added benefit of being a friend of the president – given their shared ties to the Windy City and their common love of basketball.

Duncan enters office at a critical juncture for NCLB – the law was scheduled for reauthorization in early 2007. Action, however, was forestalled during the 110th Congress as the new Democratic majority held hearings and set their priorities for the reform process. Ultimately, a draft bill was released by House Democrats that was widely criticized – and Congressional leaders were unable to reach compromise on key issues with the lame-duck Bush Administration.

As readers will recall, the AAG closely monitored the reauthorization efforts over the last two years and encouraged geography supporters to contact their members of Congress in support of including specific funding authorizations for geography education in the legislation. AAG staff also met with key Congressional aides last year to augment our message and support contacts made by members. Those efforts have put us in a stronger position here in the 111th Congress.

Congressional leaders have been focused on the stimulus, the economy, and building relations with and confirming officials for the Obama Administration to this point, but they are starting to turn to other key issues. Rep. George Miller (D-CA), Chair of the House Education & Labor Committee, has indicated that the NCLB reauthorization is a key priority for his panel this year and he indicated that the more than $100 billion in education funding provided in the stimulus gives Congress and the Administration “credibility” with the education community and American people as they work together to reform the law.

Duncan has pushed for several key changes in NCLB and recently joined with Obama at an event on March 10 as the President laid out his education agenda. Obama asserted that the nation’s economic struggles mean that education is now “a prerequisite for success,” and while he did not go into much detail about his goals for specific subjects, he did indicate his support for “offering extra pay to Americans who teach math and science to end a teacher shortage in those subjects.”

The AAG will continue to work assertively and collaboratively with our partners in GENIEP and the geography community to push for additional attention to and funding for geographic education. It is our understanding that Senate education leaders will seek to attach the Teaching Geography is Fundamental (TGIF) Act to the NCLB during the reauthorization process as the key vehicle for education programs in our discipline. In addition to monitoring and supporting this effort in 2009, we will also look to reach out to Secretary Duncan and key members of his staff as opportunities arise. And we will continue to seek your support and involvement throughout the process.

John Wertman
jwertman@aag.org

Receive Your AAG Journals Online Only

If you would prefer to receive your Journals, The Professional Geographer and The Annals of the AAG, online only, and not to receive paper copies of the Journals, you may do so by logging into your online member profile and editing your personal information. At the bottom of your profile page you may check boxes to opt out of receiving paper copies of the AAG journals. AAG members will still have online access to all articles.

Please direct questions to Laura Miller at 202-234-1450 or lmiller@aag.org.