AAG Joins Response to Limits on Government Conference Travel

In late April, several members of Congress of both parties undertook an effort to curtail the ability of federal employees to attend conferences. Legislative proposals were floated that would have limited meeting expenditure amounts, prevented multiple employees from any agency attending the same event, and instituted new reporting requirements related to conference attendance. These proposals were made largely in response to a highly-publicized scandal involving the alleged misuse of funds for travel and conference attendance at the U.S. General Services Administration.

While no laws have yet been enacted on this topic, the Obama Administration did issue a directive to the Executive Branch that requires each department and agency to reduce travel expenditures by 30 percent and to report and receive approvals on single-conference expenditures of greater than $100,000.

The AAG and many of our fellow professional associations and academic organizations are obviously concerned about the potential for new limits on government employee travel to conferences. We greatly value the significant contributions federal employees make to our annual meetings and other events each year across a broad range of important topics and subdisciplines, and we want to ensure their continued participation in the future.

Accordingly, the AAG has signed onto letters organized by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE), and the Consortium of Social Science Associations (COSSA) opposing any restrictions that would unnecessarily limit the ability of government workers to travel to academic conferences.

While several key members of Congress have signaled that they understand the challenges of imposing travel limits on federal employees and value the economic benefits of conferences held in their home states, legislation that would limit participation remains on the table. This issue remains fluid and we will keep you updated on important developments in this column.

Endorsements Continue for AAG Geography Education Resolution

The “AAG Resolution Supporting K-12 Geography Education” has continued to garner support in recent weeks. The resolution explains the value and importance of geography education and urges policymakers to include geography and geospatial education in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) proposals; to include funding for geography education as part of a reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act; and to enhance geography teacher training. In addition to many geography organizations, environmental groups, and public officials, the following major private-sector organizations have endorsed the resolution recently:

- CMS Energy is a public utility supplying electric power and natural gas to Metro Detroit and most of Michigan. CMS is a Fortune 500 company and its headquarters are located in Jackson, Michigan.
- Lockheed Martin is a global aerospace, defense, security, and advanced technology company with its headquarters in Bethesda, Maryland. It is a mainstay on the Fortune 100 list.
- National Grid U.S. serves over 3.3 million customers with electrical power and 3.4 million customers with natural gas in the states of Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Rhode Island and Vermont. It is part of a global Fortune 500 company.
- Public Service Enterprise Group is a Fortune 500 company that provides power and gas to about three-quarters of New Jersey’s population. It was founded in 1903 and is based in Newark.
- Verizon Communications is a global broadband and telecommunications company based in New York City. It started as Bell Atlantic in 1983 and has risen to be a Fortune 50 company and the largest wireless carrier in the U.S.

We are grateful to each of these leading companies for valuing geography education. The full text of the Resolution and a list of all endorsers can be found at http://www.aag.org/AAGEducationResolution.

Cornell Geographer Discusses Fracking on Capitol Hill

On June 25, Susan Christopherson, an economic geographer in the Department of City and Regional Planning at Cornell University, gave a presentation on Capitol Hill on the social impacts of unconventional natural gas extraction using hydraulic fracturing, commonly known as “fracking.” The event also featured engineer Anthony Ingraffea and was organized by Cornell’s Atkinson Center for a Sustainable Future.

Christopherson opened by sharing some 2012 polling data from New York State, where several upstate counties have been targeted for fracking: 53 percent of respondents across the state indicated that the risk of water contamination outweighs any possible revenues from gas drilling and 45 percent felt the overall quality of life in communities impacted by gas drilling would get worse vs. only 32 percent who indicated it would get better. Upstate residents were more likely to respond that quality of life would diminish as a result of the extraction efforts.

Picking up on this theme, Christopherson noted that several New York municipalities have either banned fracking completely or have moratoria in place. Residents are concerned not only about the risk to water supplies, but also about multiple other side effects of drilling activity, including truck traffic, road wear, noise, air pollution, increased criminal activity, the crowding out of farming, recreation, and tourism, and public costs from the development of an industrial landscape.

One major debate over fracking has involved the potential associated economic benefits for the local community, including the promise of job growth. Christopherson indicated that many of the drilling crews are brought in from out-of-state, and that

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Race, Ethnicity, and Place Conference
October 24-26, 2012, San Juan, Puerto Rico

Although the deadline to submit abstracts has passed, it is not too late to register to attend the sixth biennial Race, Ethnicity, and Place Conference (REP VI). The theme for this year’s conference is “Puerto Rico: Crossroads to Diversity.” This will be the first REP meeting to be held outside the continental United States. The conference will take place October 24-26, 2012 in San Juan and is being hosted by the Department of Geography at the University of Puerto Rico (UPR).

Speakers and Sessions
Along with hundreds of paper, poster, and panel presentations, the conference will feature several plenary sessions that incorporate local perspectives. Thursday’s luncheon will include a dialogue on diversity in higher education between Orlando Taylor, President of The Chicago School of Professional Psychology’s Washington, DC campus, and Ana Guadalupe, Chancellor of The University of Puerto Rico-San Juan. President Taylor also will chair a multidisciplinary roundtable dealing with diversity issues in higher education later in the conference. Friday’s luncheon plenary will be delivered by UPR Professor Emilio Pantojas, a well-known Caribbean scholar who will speak about Caribbean tourism.

Cultural Events
The REP planning committee has organized a number of opportunities to explore local landscapes and experience the sights, sounds, and tastes of Caribbean culture. Meals featuring regional cuisine and special performances have been arranged for each day of the conference. The Friday night gala will close the conference on a festive note with a live salsa band and dance lessons.

Field Trips and Excursions
All conference participants and their accompanying family members are invited to partake in two free excursions: a two-hour tour and tasting at the Bacardi rum plant in Cataño (Wednesday) and a guided walking tour of Old San Juan, focusing on its urban and historical geography (Saturday).

A three-day, pre-conference excursion will explore a cross-section of Puerto Rico’s physical and cultural landscapes, including Ponce (Puerto Rico’s second-largest city) and Guánica, Hacienda Buena Vista; the bioluminescent bay at La Parguera; the town of San Germán and the Cabo Rojo lighthouse; the Arecibo space observatory; and mangrove forest and beach ecosystems. In addition, numerous optional field trips have been organized (spaces are limited and additional fees are required). Daytrips will include a visit to the largest U.S. tropical rainforest in the Atlantic followed by night kayaking in the bioluminescent bay; a hands-on demonstration of the coffee production process from bean to cup; a catamaran journey to the reefs and beaches of Culebra Island; and an exploration of Vieques Island’s military heritage.

Register Today
More than 400 students, faculty, and other professionals representing a wide range of disciplines and countries have already registered for REP VI. These scholars share an interest in racial and ethnic transformation of places worldwide and reflect a mix of applied and theoretical perspectives, often within a spatial framework. As always, the REP conference is a student-friendly event, and students of all levels are welcome and strongly encouraged to participate as presenters and attendees.

The primary venue for the Race, Ethnicity, and Place conference is the Intercontinental San Juan Hotel and Casino. The conference program has been arranged to provide free time during the afternoons for enjoying the beach, exploring the city, connecting with colleagues, and socializing with friends.

To register, visit http://rep-conference.binghamton.edu. The website and all conference materials are available in both English and Spanish.