As Debt Limit Debate Dominates Washington, AAG Fights Cuts to SBE

While the partisan debate over the debt limit increase monopolized the attention of political Washington in recent weeks, many other key issues awaits resolution. Perhaps chief among these (from the AAG’s perspective) is the battle over funding for the National Science Foundation (NSF) – and in particular, the NSF's Social, Behavioral, and Economic (SBE) Sciences Directorate, which includes the Geography and Spatial Sciences program.

Last year, House Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-VA) issued a website called “You Cut” that urges citizen reviews of federal spending. The first agency profiled on the site was NSF – and the background material suggested that many Foundation grants are not “hard” science and are unworthy of funding. On the same page, the site asks viewers to search the NSF website for grants they find “wasteful” and to submit the award numbers for the grants in question. The site suggests certain search terms when looking for grants, including: “culture,” “media,” “social norm,” “museum,” and “leisure.”

As a result of the “You Cut” spotlight and related comments from other members of Congress, there is concern that the House will attempt to slash SBE funding as part of the Fiscal Year 2012 appropriations process. Accordingly, the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) and the Consortium of Social Science Associations (COSSA) organized a sign-on letter urging appropriators in the U.S. House of Representatives to avoid substantially reducing funding for the SBE Directorate. The AAAS and COSSA have collected support from over 150 prominent universities, organizations, and businesses, and the AAG was one of the first signatories.

The AAAS/COSSA letter is notable for geographers because it specifically highlights advances in GIS technology: “Furthermore, social scientists, working with computer scientists, have developed Geographical Information Systems (GIS). As an example of technology transfer, this in turn created a multi-billion dollar GIS industry. The research supported in the mid-1980s at the NSF-funded National Center for Geographic Information and Analysis (NCGIA) has been applied by states, counties, and localities for many purposes, from urban planning to disaster response, evidenced in New York City during the September 11, 2001 attacks and the creation of thousands of maps to assist in the aftermath. Simply put, we need all scientists and scientific disciplines working – alone and together – to advance our knowledge base.”

To date, the House has held two hearings on NSF appropriations, and the SBE has been held largely harmless. The Commerce, Justice, Science bill – which includes funding for the Foundation – will be considered by the full House after Congress’ August recess, so an opportunity still does exist for amendments that would diminish or even cripple the SBE budget. We will continue to remain vigilant and work with our friends at COSSA and the AAAS on this issue.

House Continues Work on ESEA; Richardson, O’Malley, and Herbert Endorse AAG Resolution

The House Committee on Education and the Workforce has continued its piecemeal approach to the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). On July 13, the panel approved H.R. 2445, the State and Local Funding Flexibility Act, on a party-line vote of 23-17.

Republicans and Democrats on the Committee differed sharply as to the legislation's goals. Chairman John Kline (R-MN) argued the bill, “takes a new approach by putting decision-making back in the hands of the state and local officials who can develop effective programs and initiatives that best prepare children for success.” Rep. George Miller (D-CA), the Committee's Ranking Democrat, attacked the legislation, asserting, “This shortsighted proposal would allow chief state school officers and school district superintendents to siphon away money intended for poor and minority students and instead use that targeted funding for nearly any other activity allowed under the ESEA.”

The bill will likely be considered by the full House after the August recess, but given the strong Democratic opposition, it will almost-certainly fail to advance in the Senate even if it is approved by the House.

In related news, three key political figures recently endorsed the “AAG Resolution Supporting K-12 Geography Education:”

- The Honorable Bill Richardson. Richardson has had an impressive career in public service, including time as Congressman, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations, U.S. Secretary of Energy, and Governor of New Mexico. He has been called on many times by multiple presidents to take on sensitive missions abroad to world hotspots and has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. He holds BA and MA degrees from Tufts University.
- Governor Martin O’Malley (Maryland). Martin O’Malley is currently serving his second term as Governor of Maryland, having won elections in 2006 and 2010. He previously held office as Mayor and as a City Councilman in Baltimore. He holds a BA from the Catholic University of America and a JD from the University of Maryland School Of Law.
- Governor Gary Herbert (Utah). Gary Herbert served as Lieutenant Governor of Utah from 2005-2009 and took office as the state’s chief executive upon the departure of Governor Jon Huntsman, who resigned to serve as U.S. Ambassador to China. Herbert won a special election in 2010 to remain in office by an impressive margin of 34 percent. Prior to his time as Lieutenant Governor, he was a Utah County Commissioner.

We thank these individuals for their support of our important work. With the additions of Governors O’Malley (D) and Herbert (R), the resolution has now been endorsed by a bipartisan group of five current state governors.

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