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**2008 GOVERNMENT RESEARCH
ASSOCIATION (GRA)
CONFERENCE BOSTON, MASS.**

Thirty-one people from 25 different organizations attended this year's conference. Most of the groups deal with state-level issues, but there were other local government associations from cities such as Boston and Worcester, MA, and Milwaukee, WI.

There are a number of issues that the Association has with the area governments, but let me tell you that overall our governments do pretty well compared to what others face. For example, the Louisiana group won an award for their multi-year research into corruption and the state legislature's reform (or more accurately, lack of reform). While we cannot ignore CIETEC, that is an aberration, rather than standard practice.

PERFORMANCE MEASURES

Another example is Performance Measures, the subject of the first session. The four municipal governments we analyze collect Performance Measures, even though there needs to be a better integration with budget decisions. Other cities have not even gotten to the step of collecting data. The multiple uses and benefits of GIS were discussed. Both Polk County and the City of Des Moines have recognized that this is underutilized.

Another issue that was brought up was that it would be beneficial in multi-jurisdictional areas such as ours that Performance Measures – both is number and the activity being measured – should be uniform.

The discussion panel emphasized that Performance Measures should be used to improve departments and never should be used to punish department heads or their staffs.

The hard part, in every corner of the country, is to get elected officials to use data when making budgeting and other spending decisions.

FOR SALE: GOVERNMENT ASSETS was the subject of the next session. Chicago has been in the news for their 99-year lease (sale) of a toll bridge and possibly other facilities. The panels conclusion was that these sales could be as successful in the US as they have been in Europe if the government takes a long-term view of the process and not just at the short-term influx of cash, that accountability in the contract is carefully spelled out, that the entire process is transparent, that both parties “have skin in the game” (that is, that both have a stake in the outcome), and that the government spends the money to hire experts to negotiate for them so they are protected, since these deals are usually far out of the norm of what city/county attorneys deal with. Finally, the contract needs to have an allowance for mid-

term re-negotiations, as situations for both the government and the private company change.

Transportation assets have been the focus in the US, but in Europe sewage facilities, buildings, solid waste, and even lotteries have been privatized.

The Final session on Monday dealt with HOUSING FORCLOSURES. Paul Willen, the Senior Economist and Policy Advisor at the Federal Reserve Bank in Boston shared with the group his research into the causes of the huge increase in home foreclosures in Boston. His data showed that subprime mortgages did not contribute to the crisis. Instead, it was the rapid increase in home prices, followed by a rapid fall. Low-to-moderate income families lost jobs due to the economic downturn, and as a result, could no longer afford to make their payments.

Tuesday started with a session only a number crunching geek would love (all of us at the conference qualify). A BETTER DEFLATION INDICATOR – GDP (Gross Domestic Product). Most of us “in the business” use the CPI to adjust dollars as we try to compare revenues and expenditures from past years with current dollars. Our speaker, Robert Ward from the Rockefeller Institute, suggested that using the GDP provides a more accurate picture. A lively discussion between the speaker and the audience’s Economics PhD’s ensued, with both side eventually switching positions. As Harry Truman said, “give me a one-handed economist”.

On a more serious note, a report written by the Rockefeller Institute on state finances (rockinst.org) shows that Iowa’s legislature has overcommitted future revenues. Iowa now appears on their “States to Watch” list, which is not a good thing.

UNIVERSAL HEALTH CARE IN MASSACHUSETTS was next on Tuesday morning. The commonwealth of

Massachusetts (or, as the GRA member from Texas called it, the Peoples Democratic Republic of Massachusetts – socialists, but not really communists) decided to “spend funds to enroll people in health insurance programs rather than on institutions”.

The good news for the Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation was that the Commonwealth asked them to help estimate the costs to implement the program. The bad news was that the estimate was about 30% to low. Still, the group was instrumental in helping all stakeholders reach a compromise “building on 20 years of incremental changes to the system”. The various groups are working on containing costs now that most people in Mass are covered by insurance. The panel and moderator warned us that only a small, “rich” state with a strong economy could afford the program they adopted.

The last session of the day dealt with SOUND STATE FISCAL POLICIES. These five points will be familiar with those of our members who also belong to the Iowa Taxpayers Association. 1) One-time funds are to be used only for one-time expenditures. 2) Before passing legislation, the fiscal impact – revenues and costs – need to be estimated for three years out. 3) Balances and Reserves need to be invested wisely. 4) “Rainy Day” funds need to be adequately funded. 5) Pay for growth first.

Ed Glaeser, PhD, Professor of Economics at Harvard, was our dinner speaker that evening. He studies the economics of cities. The point of his talk is that the keys to any city’s success (through history: Athens, Rome, London, New York,) are the people. Their knowledge and innovation are what makes a city great. What every city should do is to make sure there is affordable housing, while the schools in the city need to ensure all obtain a good education so that generations are not trapped in poverty.

Dr. Glaeser mentioned Iowa twice in his address. “Chicago grew on the basis of its packing industry. All a hog is, after all, is Iowa corn on four legs.” “Iowa should not be sad that it’s young people move out of state. They should be proud that they have prepared these people to succeed in the world.”

Education was the subject for the last day: THE K-16 CONNECTION. The North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research put together a GRA award winning report on the lack of a vertical alignment among k-12, community colleges, and 4-year colleges in North Carolina. Those of us who have read David Yepsen’s comments on Iowa CC’s already know many of the steps that NC determined is needed to improve their system.

The comments from the panel are also familiar to us in Iowa. The world is changing, and education needs to change from the 19th Century model to a 21st Century model. This change cannot be accomplished by just throwing money into the system. The system also needs to change (more than 180 days, longer days, professional development, and high expectations for students, teachers, & parents). It’s not that the US is failing, it’s that the US is stagnant while the rest of the world is improving, eroding the lead the US built from 1900 through the 1980’s (“success bred complacency”). Harry Spence, (JFK School of Government), stated “we must recognize that we ARE in an educational **crisis**, but that many don’t believe that. We must reach a **consensus** on how to proceed. Then we must make the **commitment** to change – **C3**.”

The three Massachusetts GRA organizations that hosted the conference did a terrific job. Boston was wonderful (Red Lobster is to real seafood as a fastfood hamburger is to prime rib). Conversations with the other GRA members were stimulating (the humor, however, was very inside and, as I

said earlier, geeky). Outgoing GRA President Ran Coble (North Carolina) was the epitome of southern grace and charm.

I want to thank the Executive Committee for allowing and encouraging my attendance at this event.

A WORD ON STATISTICS

By Wislawa Szymborska

Out of every hundred people,

those who always know better: fifty-two.

Unsure of every step: almost all the rest.

Ready to help, if it doesn't take long: forty-nine.

Always good, because they cannot be otherwise: four -- well, maybe five.

Able to admire without envy: eighteen.

Led to error by youth (which passes): sixty, plus or minus.

Those not to be messed with: four-and-forty.

Living in constant fear of someone or something: seventy-seven.

Capable of happiness: twenty-some-odd at most.

Harmless alone, turning savage in crowds: more than half, for sure.

Cruel when forced by circumstances: it's better not to know, not even approximately.

Wise in hindsight: not many more than wise in foresight.

Getting nothing out of life except things: thirty(though I would like to be wrong).

Balled up in pain and without a flashlight in the dark: eighty-three, sooner or later.

Those who are just: quite a few, thirty-five.

But if it takes effort to understand: three.

Worthy of empathy: ninety-nine.

Mortal: one hundred out of one hundred -- a figure that has never varied yet.

Wislawa Szymborska won the 1996 Nobel Prize for literature. Her most recent book in English is View With a Grain of Sand (1995). She lives in Krakow, Poland. Joanna Trzeciak, the translator of Szymborska's poem in this issue, is currently at work on a collection of translations of Szymborska's poetry.