

County Leaders from Oklahoma Invited to the White House Vice President Mike Pence Thanked Counties for Their Work and Being the Boots On The Ground

County leaders from the state of Oklahoma were invited to the White House to develop a working relationship between the Office of Intergovernmental Affairs and counties and cities. There were over 30 county commissioners from Oklahoma including Grant County Commissioners Cindy Bobbitt and Max Hess. Additionally, Oklahoma Municipal League Executive Director Mike Fina and other City Mayors and officials were in attendance. In total there were over 50 representing Oklahoma.



1 County Leaders from Oklahoma gather at the White House for a conference to work on partnerships. Grant County Commissioners Cindy Bobbitt and Max Hess were in attendance.

The National Association of Counties (NACo) hosted Oklahoma officials in a pre-briefing on issues of importance to counties, including the farm bill, transportation, education, PILT, SRS and the opioid crisis, just to name a few. Executive Director Matt Chase welcomed the county commissioners followed by greetings from Cindy Bobbitt, NACo Central Region Representative.

Despite the drenching rain the following day, officials took a tour of the White House in the morning and in the afternoon went to the White House Conference in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building. Britt Carter, Associate Director of White House Intergovernmental Affairs served as facilitator. Carter is a true friend of county government and said Trumps Administration will work with local government!



Grant County Commissioner Bobbitt gets a "selfie" with Vice President Pence during the White House briefing.

Vice President Mike Pence was well spoken; he recognized the importance of counties and that counties are the boots on the ground, the ones doing the work! He relayed that President Trump couldn't make it to our meeting as he was out of town; however, Pence pointed out that he was hearing the President's helicopter coming in to land as he was speaking with us. Pence said that President Trump believes that we all need to lead by asking questions, and that is what he does. He shared numerous stories' including building our nation's economy that presently has grown over 4% this year. During the election the press said that would never be

accomplished, but it continues to grow. A group picture was taken followed by a few "selfies" that Pence allowed.

Opening remarks were heard from Douglas Hoelscher, Deputy Assistant to the President and Director of Intergovernmental Affairs. He is an Iowan farm boy and very knowledgeable about county issues. He said this Administration is in the business of giving answers, it may not always be “yes”, but answers will be given!

Chris Mitton, US Department of Transportation Senior Government Affairs Officer spoke on Oklahoma commissioners favorite issue – transportation. He addressed the “One Agency – One Decision” that would help address environmental issues to shorten the timeline for transportation projects.

Bobbitt said, “I have been fortunate to work directly with Chris Mitton through my leadership with our NACo Transportation Committee and he is passionate about county infrastructure.”

Ron Burrows, Rogers County Commissioner, asked questions about port fees and the need to have the rivers that serve ports dredged. The Port of Catoosa has 18 Locks and 445 miles that adds not only to Oklahoma and Arkansas economic development but also to a global economy.

Additionally, Bobbitt asked about the \$225 million Rural Bridge Grant Program and when the rules for application might be released and again requested that the funds be distributed directly through counties. This grant program provides capital from the General Funds and are not funded through Transportation dollars. Mitton said the Administration will release final regulations soon.

Secretary of Ag Sonny Perdue spoke on the farm bill as well as PILT and SRS. Sec. Perdue said that he would like to see SRS replaced with working lands to get production from the timber and to restore our forest to a healthy state. He spoke about not only “free trade” but more importantly “fair trade”. Bobbitt asked about rural broadband and if the government was providing more grants and/or USDA loans to rural areas. Sec. Perdue said that rural broadband was a higher priority than funding 5G broadband in Urban Cities.

Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said the President is committed to join and celebrate the work that counties do. Before every Press Conference she says a devotional prayer. She welcomed our questions and hoped they wouldn’t be too tough! Joe Don Dickey, Tillman County Commissioner asked about “The Wall”. Sanders said, “Yes, it is still a priority for the President”.

Deputy Secretary Mick Zais, US Department of Education, said school safety is a top priority. He also said that no directives and no unfunded mandates will come out of this council on school safety! This is great news for schools and counties when unfunded mandates are not passed down. Zais also provided statistics from 1965 to the present and since 1970 enrollment is up 10% but cost per pupil has increased 275%. Zais said, “All special interest lobby groups represent their due paying members and do not represent the children – the student!”

Jim Carroll, Deputy Director & Acting Director, Office of National Drug Control Policy said that the opioid crisis is actually a drug addiction issue. Dr. Harold Haralson, Cleveland County Commissioner, commented that some of the problem with prior prescription writes was because people believe that they should live “pain-free”. Patients use the “happy face” chart for pain level acknowledgment and then services are often evaluated on that level of relief. High pain level equals bad service – low pain level equals good service, this is neither the way to treat people nor a way to do business.

Doug Little, US Department of Energy, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Intergovernmental & External Affairs, addressed energy issues as well as security. The U.S. military has only 3 to 5 days of fuel

reserves on site and 98% of our military bases depend on power provided by commercial business. For security reasons these need to be addressed.

Closing remarks were delivered by William Crozer, Special Assistant to the President & Deputy Director of Intergovernmental Affairs. Today's meeting was all about building partnerships and the White House is committed to being our partner.



2 Grant County Commissioner Hess tours the U.S. Senate Chambers following a visit with Senator Jim Inhofe.

Max Hess and other county commissioners also spent time with Senator Jim Inhofe discussing transportation issues and the \$225 million Rural Bridge Grant. Transportation and military are issues of great importance to Oklahoma and to Inhofe.

The result of these meetings is that a great working partnership between the White House and Counties in Oklahoma has begun. By working together many things can be accomplished because counties matter!

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