

Getting Our Fair Share

Written by Jeff Ignatius

Tuesday, 18 March 2003 18:00

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The running joke for the Quad City Development Group's lobbying trip to Washington, D.C., last week was that the 70 attendees would be able to recite from memory the Rock Island Arsenal pitch given by Rock Island Mayor Mark Schwiebert.

The joke is funny because it's largely true. Over the course of a little more than 24 hours on March 12 and 13, Schwiebert gave his presentation seven times: to the four senators from Illinois and Iowa, to the Quad Cities' two House members, and to an aide to House Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-Illinois).

Those meetings – typically half an hour, but as short as eight minutes in the case of Senator Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa), who had to return to the Senate chamber for a vote – were the heart of the visit organized by the Quad City Development Group. The annual journey started seven years ago with about a dozen people.

The contingent from the Quad Cities gave each official a briefing booklet (featuring dozens of projects totaling \$288 million) and in oral presentations focused on three priorities: the Rock Island Arsenal; a new Interstate 74 bridge over the Mississippi and its four-mile corridor; and passenger rail connecting the Quad Cities to Chicago.

These projects are arguably pork – important locally but not necessarily in-line with federal priorities – yet those on the trip shrugged when asked about the appropriateness of federal funding for such projects in difficult economic times. One consistent theme was that the lobbying visit was an attempt to get back some of the tax dollars the Quad Cities put into federal coffers. Some might call it pork, but those on the trip – primarily public-sector and business leaders – called it the Quad Cities' "fair share."

That attitude extends to some of the elected officials. Senator Peter Fitzgerald (R-Illinois) stressed that the state's congressional delegation is working to revise the federal formula for dispersing transportation dollars. "We're a donor state," he said, getting back only 92 cents for

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each dollar it puts in.

Fitzgerald then asked about Iowa's status. "We're a donee," responded one person. (Iowa gets \$1.04 per dollar contributed.) "But there are 48 other states to take from." That person was joking – at least a little bit.

A Regional Approach

Smartly, the presentations to legislators and their aides stressed regional interests over local ones.

Quad Cities representatives could cast the Rock Island Arsenal as a vital component of the local economy, with an impact of \$550 million each year.

Instead, Schwiebert noted that the Rock Island Arsenal is the only remaining metal-manufacturing facility in the United States military. "Needs arose during conflict" in Kosovo and Bosnia, he added, and the Arsenal was able to provide the military with what it needed on short notice. An "in-house" facility is important to meet those demands, he stressed. Although he didn't directly connect that statement to the impending war with Iraq, the link was easily inferred.

Schwiebert said that instead of closing the Rock Island Arsenal – which has been in operation for nearly 190 years – the federal government should boost its efficiency by increasing its workload and helping it to lease unused space. Also on the agenda is a \$2.9-million appropriation for the final phase of improvements for the Government Bridge. The basic argument is that the Arsenal's overhead is high because there aren't enough projects there; the federal government could make the facility more competitive through increased workload instead of subsidies, Schwiebert said.

Similarly, creating a passenger-rail corridor that connects the Quad Cities to Chicago (and eventually goes as far west as Omaha, Nebraska) was cast as regional rather than a local issue, part of the Midwest Rail Initiative. The Chicago-to-Quad Cities line would be one of several "spokes" originating in the Windy City. Passenger rail has the potential to reduce wear and tear on the federal interstate system and cut down traffic congestion.

Rail investment could also pay off for the federal government in terms of freight transportation. Denise Bulat, executive director of the Bi-State Regional Commission, argued that a \$50 billion investment in railroad infrastructure would help maintain the percentage of freight transportation currently done by rail. That would save the federal government \$250 billion in wear on interstates, she said.

And the I-74 project was positioned as bringing the bridge into compliance with federal interstate standards. The current Quad Cities span is the only bridge in the interstate system that doesn't meet those standards. A corridor-alignment study – exploring alternative placements of the bridge – is almost done. A decision on alignment and an initial design could be complete next year. Previous Washington, D.C., trips are credited with securing \$14 million

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in federal funding for I-74 bridge studies.

Quad Cities representatives still spoke out of self-interest, of course, stressing the urgency of these three priorities. "We need a new bridge, and we need it badly," said Moline Mayor Stan Leach, one of seven area mayors on the trip. The bridge is "our number-one transportation priority in the Quad Cities," said Moline City Administrator Dale Iman.

Generally, the legislators were curious and alert. On the I-74 bridge corridor, Fitzgerald asked from what other sources funding might come. He also asked whether it might be possible to put a toll on the new bridge to help pay for it. But because congestion is one of the reasons for the new bridge, he quickly dismissed that idea.

Having the I-74 bridge and passenger rail high on the Quad City Development Group agenda is especially apropos now. Congress will be prioritizing federal road and rail projects this year and next. "The witching hour of transportation programs is now," said Mark Yachmetz, associate administrator of the Federal Rail Administration, at a Thursday-morning briefing.

No Promises

The key issue with the I-74 bridge project is how it would be funded. Officials estimate its cost at between \$600 million and \$650 million. The Quad Cities contingent is asking for \$100 million for the project in an omnibus transportation bill. The current authorization act expires later this year, and up-front federal money is seen as the key to drawing money from the states of Iowa and Illinois.

The easiest way to get the federal money would be "earmarking," a euphemism for a process in which representatives and senators have a certain amount of money to spend for projects in their districts.

Yet the massive cost of a new I-74 bridge corridor would mean that the project could eat up all or most of representatives' earmarking money, leaving no cash for other projects. And earmarking is most likely to happen with representatives instead of senators, because senators represent the entire state.

Senator Dick Durbin (D-Illinois) suggested focusing lobbying efforts on Representatives Lane Evans (D-Illinois) and Jim Nussle (R-Iowa), because the earmarking process begins with House members. Senators only get involved in the conference committee – where House and Senate versions of bills are reconciled.

A more likely way to get that much money would be through the appropriations process. For that reason, the primary action request for the bridge is that the project be authorized in the 2003 Transportation Act. That would establish a new bridge as a federal priority, paving the way for future appropriations. The challenge with that, of course, is convincing federal bureaucrats and legislators nationwide of the importance of the project.

Although legislators listened intently to the presentations, they made few commitments to the

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Quad Cities.

Fitzgerald said that transportation projects around the state are likely to take a back seat to those in Chicago, which has proposed \$3 billion in road projects. “The loudest voice is Chicago,” he said.

And the aide to House Speaker Hastert said the I-74 project has “a hefty price tag for one project.”

While most legislators cast themselves as advocates for their constituencies, Nussle was wearing his House Budget Committee chairperson hat. At 1:30 a.m. of the day the Quad Cities leaders met with him, his committee passed a spending plan that would be balanced within seven years. That necessitated a 1-percent cut for most federal departments and programs outside of defense.

Nussle said up-front that local projects might take a back seat to balancing the federal budget. “My job is to set the fence line – not to decide what’s inside the fence, but to set the fence line,” he said. Yet a few minutes later he added, “Once the fences are set ... I’m going to fight like hell for you.”

Nussle said he’d support whatever I-74 bridge-corridor project is decided upon but stopped short of saying he’d actively campaign for the issue. And he added that passenger rail for the Quad Cities is “going to be a real challenge.” The federal government has invested in highways instead of railways over the past 40 to 60 years, he said, and he doesn’t see that changing.

The continuing troubles of Amtrak – which has been given mandates in recent years to reduce its dependence on federal subsidies but has made little progress – cast further doubt on the likelihood of federal funding for rail improvements and passenger service in the Quad Cities area.

Nussle in general argued that the federal government shouldn’t be seen by communities as a funding source for whatever projects they deem important. Talking about money for “first responders” such as fire departments, he said the federal government’s job is to cost-effectively address a problem, such as funding fire-prevention programs, and “not just make it easier ... to buy a new fire truck.”

The Mating Ritual

But what exactly do these face-to-face meetings accomplish? As Moline Mayor Stan Leach noted during a presentation to Evans on the I-74 bridge corridor, “This is sort of like preaching to the choir” because the legislator is well aware of the issue and has supported the project in the past.

Davenport City Administrator Craig Malin explained that the D.C. trip is similar to the mating rituals that one might see on nature programs on television. The process of getting federal funding for projects is long and involved, and communities have to go through the proper steps

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to get action. Meeting with legislators to explain local priorities is just one of the steps.

Thom Hart, president of the Quad City Development Group, has said these trips are part of a long-term process of building relationships. Hart has said previous trips have resulted in more than \$75 million in funding for the Rock Island Arsenal, upgrading the Government Bridge, planning for a new I-74 bridge, housing initiatives, the Rock Island County Records System, and riverfront projects in the Illinois Quad Cities.

And comments from legislators suggest the trips are effective.

Durbin said the size of the Quad Cities group “makes an impression, a very positive impression.”

Fitzgerald said the Quad Cities contingent is “the best organized” of all the groups that visit him.

“It’s nice to work with people who are together,” said Senator Tom Harkin (D-Iowa).

Therein lies a key to the success of the Quad City Development Group trip: presenting a unified front for a metro area that includes parts of two states, multiple counties, and more than two dozen municipalities.

And a federal bureaucrat noted that the Quad Cities contingent approaches its agenda properly. Said the Federal Rail Administration’s Yachmetz: “Congress actually responds to its constituents.”

To read a report on last year’s lobbying trip to Washington, visit (http://www.rcreader.com/display_article.php3?index=1&artid=798).