

Headliners give conference participants much to ponder

NACo conferences are notable for their top-notch speakers from both the private and the public sphere. The 2009 Annual Conference was no exception. Following is a review of the general sessions' headliners.

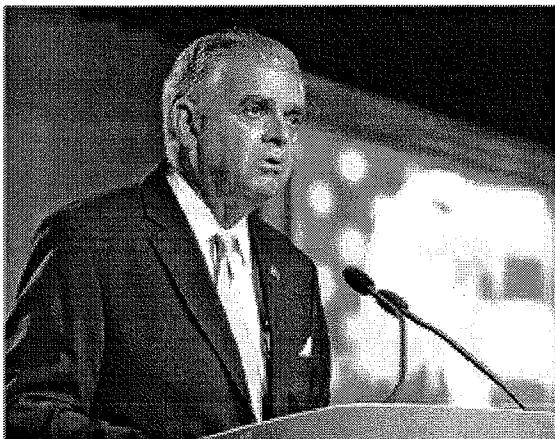
U.S. Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood and noted workforce generational expert Tamara Erickson keynoted the Opening General Session of NACo's 74th Annual Conference on July 26.

Ray LaHood

During his remarks, LaHood said the Obama administration understands that city and county governments have only a modest say in how U.S. DOT funds are spent. "We want to change that," LaHood said, by directly funding metro regions, which now receive their money via state pass-through.

"We want to allow counties and cities to work together to develop regional plans reflecting both regional and national priorities. Then we'd fund them directly," he said.

LaHood, a former congressman from Illinois, also spoke of the Obama administration's desire to substantially overhaul how transportation funding is awarded. He said funding should be determined less by the mode of transportation and more by a community's priorities for its growth and needs.



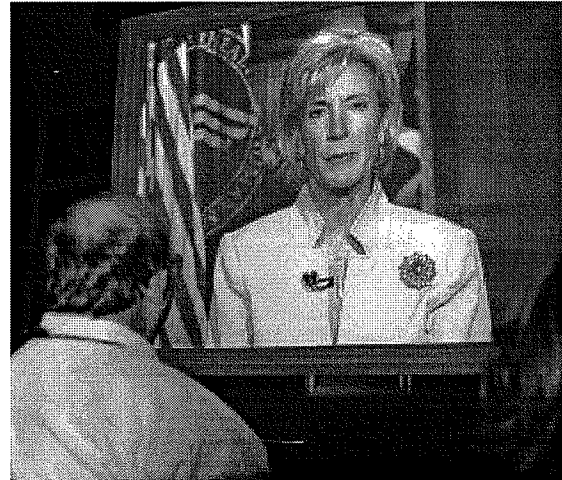
Ray LaHood
U.S. Secretary of Transportation

"For many years, federal transportation spending has mainly been driven by rigid formulas and divided by modes of transportation — with separate funding for each type of need, from highways to subways to ferries. We need to turn this around, so that our priorities, and the outcomes people care about, drive our investments," he said.

"For instance, we think it makes sense to coordinate land-use planning and transportation, and build transit and affordable housing closer together. It makes sense to put more fuel-efficient transit buses, rail cars and streetcars in our cities, suburbs and villages. Federal funding should flow towards priorities like these."

To encourage the development of national priorities, DOT will use its \$1.5 billion TIGER (Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery) discretionary grant program funded through the Recovery Act.

"We've made it clear that the TIGER discretionary grants will reflect national priorities for projects that make us more competitive and enhance livability. In other words, we will not arbitrarily divide this money between highways and transit. Nor will we pit one mode against another. Instead, we're asking communities to put outcomes first — and then determine the type of transportation infrastructure that



Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius addressed conference delegates via pre-recorded video.

works best to meet those outcomes," LaHood explained.

In his final remarks, LaHood took a polite swipe at congressional leaders who want to pass a new transportation bill this year.

"The president and I are committed to [investing in transportation projects] that enhance our quality of life. But we think the effort is too important, and too complex, to be rushed through Congress with so many competing priorities. We've asked Congress to provide an 18-month, \$20 billion extension of the Highway Trust Fund to ensure it remains solvent through March 2011.

"In the meantime, we'll continue to map out our plan to ensure the Department of Transportation is able to invest in the transportation network that our citizens need and deserve in the 21st century."

Tamara Erickson

The changing workforce now includes four generations of employees sharing the same workplace, a fact that is bound to create some friction as workers seek to understand each other, said Tamara Erickson, an award-winning author and expert on organizations and the changing workforce.



All photos by David Hathcox
Tamara Erickson

As members of the baby boom generation continue to work well into retirement age, Erickson said it is important to understand the differences the generations bring to work relationships.

The topic of her July 26 opening session keynote was "Avoiding the Workforce Crisis: How to Beat the Coming Shortage of Skills and Talent." She claimed growth in the size of the workforce in the U.S. is slowing dramatically, with not as many people looking for jobs after the recession is over.

Over the past 30 years, the number of baby boomers entering the workforce has remained in the double digits, but Erickson said the numbers are beginning to decline in the United States and around the world.

"Looking from 2010 forward, we are going to fall down into the lower single digits," she said. "Just three or four percentage points of growth in the workplace going forward. As the economy begins to grow, to the extent that organizations depend on talent to fuel that growth, there are going to be a lot fewer people to choose from."

She said other factors involved in declining workforce numbers are lower birth rates, as society becomes more industrialized, and a "talent mismatch" between the jobs available today and the way people are educated. A majority of American workers have relatively low levels of education for the jobs that are available, with 22 percent dropping out of high school. "We don't have a match between the skill sets in our labor force and the job creation in our economy," she said.

For the first time in history, the number of jobs created could begin to outstrip the number of people who want to work, creating a sustained systematic scarcity of workers for decades. With a multigenerational workforce mix of those nearing retirement age, mid-career, and new workers, marketplace success involves getting the best out of everyone at a time when companies are faced with limited resources, she said.

In her conversations with older and younger workers about what it is like to work in multigenerational workplace, Erickson said she has heard complaints from a number of older workers who say younger

generations of workers are impatient, unwilling to work as hard as previous generations, have "lousy" communications skills and spend too much time online.

Younger workers have described today's organizations as inefficient, and say older workers "don't use technology to make their jobs easier," spend too much time in meetings and assume they are interested in building the same career paths as previous generations.

She summed up the generational groups by recalling historical defining events and their impact, including:

- Traditionalists, those born between 1928–46, tend to be respectful, comfortable with hierarchy and like to be part of organizations. "They take great pride in the identity of the company or organization for which they work."
- Boomers, those born between 1946–64, tend to be competitive and view life as a game of musical chairs, are anti-authoritarian, idealistic and interested in personally making an impact on the world. "The boomer game is you're going to run as fast as you can for as long as you can, in recognition that there aren't enough seats to go around."
- Generation X, those born between 1965–80, tend to be self-reliant, mistrustful of institutions, always have a contingency plan, are loyal to friends and dedicated parents.
- Generation Y, those born between 1980–95, tend to be impatient and interested in living in the moment, are confident, family-centric, technologically savvy and have close bonds with parents.

Ron Sims

In his July 27 General Session address, Ron Sims, deputy secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, said NACo has a seat at the White House's public policy table.

"We want your input," he said. "We want your aspirations put on the table. We want your candor as to what the relationship should be between NACo and the federal government, NACo and the White House. You will be invited to the table. We wish you to dine with us."

He also said the administration wants NACo to "continue to lead as (it) always has," and for member counties to help federal agencies to work effectively with them.

"HUD and President Obama's administration are moving into regional investments. I want to thank all of you who over all these years have lent your voices, saying 'Counties are regional,' whether you are in rural or urban areas, and now we have the solution."



Ron Sims
Deputy Secretary of Housing and Urban Development

In a spirited, nearly revival-like presentation, Sims proclaimed his agency's mission and plans for the future. He said his agency's biggest job is to help the economy and stop the foreclosures, and that HUD is investing \$14 billion in states and counties across the country, including homeless prevention and rapid re-housing programs, community block grants, and efforts to improve public housing, rebuild communities and increase energy efficiency.

"HUD is no longer a housing agency," he said. "HUD will be a world public agency and an urban development agency."

He said HUD's Sustainable Communities program will link issue areas such as land use with housing, transportation and employment opportunity. He said it is not a coincidence that the areas with the

highest foreclosure rates tend to be areas without access to public transportation, employment or local infrastructure. He said working families spend nearly 60 percent of their incomes on housing and transportation in those neighborhoods.

"Our Choice Neighborhoods Initiative will extend neighborhood transportation patterns behind public housing, broadening the range of eligible activities for funding," he said. "This will include housing interventions more closely linked with school reform and early childhood interventions."

He concluded his remarks with an impassioned tribute to his father, who achieved his dreams despite the reality of racism. "You should never aspire to run in second place," he quoted. "Always strive to be the best."

Jon Meacham

It pays to pay attention to even our flawed heroes, according to Jon Meacham, editor of *Newsweek* and author of *American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House*. A native Tennessean, Meacham said there is much to be learned from his fellow Volunteer that is applicable to today's political climate — even from Jackson's mistakes and volatility. He discussed his presidential biography during the day's general session.

Studying "flawed figures" like Jackson can make contemporary Americans "more attuned to the failings of our time," Meacham added. Jackson was motivated by the shortcomings in his life, including his loss of the presidency to John Quincy Adams in 1824, after having won a plurality of popular and electoral votes, Meacham said. The loss would drive his championing of popular democracy.

He drew several parallels between the age of Jackson and the age of Obama. As in Jackson's time, Meacham said America is in the midst of technological and global change. "We live in an era of debate about the extent of the role of government in people's lives; we're concerned over the balance between banks and the real economy, and the politics of partisanship are particularly ferocious and vicious — and play themselves out in terms of personality and scandal."

One lesson from Jackson's era has an unlikely parallel in the way the Obama administration continues to reach out to supporters via the Web and social networking. Jackson understood that his supporters didn't just want to vote for him, "they wanted to be characters in an ongoing drama." To that end, Jackson created a direct channel to the people — his own newspaper. This would be the 21st century equivalent of President Bush founding Fox News or President Obama creating NPR, Meacham said.

On why he wrote the book, Meacham said, "My view of Andrew Jackson is that any president who tries to attack his own assassin, who has two bullets in him, who fought a dozen duels, who married his wife before she was divorced from her first husband and who threatened to kill his own vice president is worth a book."



Jon Meacham
Editor, *Newsweek*

(Elizabeth Perry, Beverly Schlotterbeck and Charles Taylor, County News staff, contributed to this report.)