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Local mayors host their first Municipal Expo

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by Kevin Olsen
staff reporter

Municipal officials from the Southwest Suburbs gathered with representatives from regional agencies on Saturday to share ideas on how to strengthen area communities and the region as a whole.

The Southwest Conference of Mayors held its first Municipal Expo at Silver Lake Country Club in Orland Park. The mayors heard speakers from regional organizations before breaking up to view more than 30 exhibits at the expo.

Topics such as state pensions, unfunded mandates and video gambling were all discussed as well as ways to better each community in the southwest suburbs.

Bola Delano, deputy executive director of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP), said CMAP will release the "most dynamic, technological plan the country has seen" in October. The plan will provide recommendations for infrastructure and how to deal with various economic issues.

Delano talked about how in the old days, regions did not look at future planning, a vital part of the agency today. She said the main objective of CMAP is to build and prepare a plan for northeastern Illinois to bring more jobs into the area.

"Businesses are the stronghold of the economy," Delano said. "If we don't have businesses, we don't have an economy and we don't have jobs."

Delano repeatedly stated that "information is power." CMAP provides a variety of data for municipalities to use to better government and help businesses. The agency provides a template for a Comprehensive Plan, which she said was vital for planning. CMAP is also working on a planning law manual that will assist municipalities in building up capacity, an important factor with the 2010 census underway.

"The census equals money," Delano said. "It's all about building local and regional capacity." The census helps determine how more than \$400 billion of federal funding is spent each year on infrastructure and services such as schools, hospitals, senior centers and emergency services.

Matt Davidson, legislative director for the Illinois Municipal League, said his agency is now sending legislative briefings online to provide information to municipalities faster. The big issues the League is keeping officials up to date on are pensions, unfunded mandates and new video gambling bills. Davidson said a real concern of the IML is the General Assembly's attempts to penalize municipalities for opting out of video gambling. Legislation on red light cameras is also being closely monitored, Davidson said.

"We feel the pain like you do," Davidson said about the rising pension liabilities. "We want a cost analysis of any bill coming through."

While the Southwest Conference of Mayors covers 21 communities, it is also part of the Metropolitan Mayors Caucus that works to build consensus on policy issues such as tax reform and economic development. Executive Director Dave Bennett said the Caucus is currently working on creating a Chicago perspective on issues such as pensions and red light cameras. Bennett focused his speech on ways to cut costs, raise revenues, become more green efficient and improve communication in municipalities.

"We need to work together to protect municipal revenue," Dave Bennett said.

Bennett said municipalities can generate revenue by advertising on their websites. Municipal Media Solutions specializes in facilitating advertising on local government websites where the government receives money based on the number of views. The

Metropolitan Mayors Caucus and the Cook County Assessor's office are already using this company and generating modest income, Bennett said.

Bennett also championed the use of Zumbox as a new way for governments to communicate digitally with residents. Zumbox allows governments to send secure electronic correspondences to their residents, saving postal and printing costs. It is a free service for local governments.

Bennett said the Caucus is also a resource to local governments in obtaining energy efficiency grants. The organization is



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promoting reducing energy usage to save costs. He cited Orland Park Mayor Dan McLaughlin as a leader in the entire metropolitan area with Orland Park's green initiatives.

Jim Garrett, the president of the Chicago Southland Convention and Visitors Bureau, said his agency is constantly working on bringing conventions and trade shows to the area to make the economy more vibrant. He said the CSCVB is hoping a multi-use mega sports complex project will be constructed in the area to bring in youths and sporting events to the area.

Palos Heights Mayor Bob Straz, who serves as the treasurer of the Southwest Conference of Mayors, said the expo was a great way to show how all the towns can work together to better the area. Mayors Conference President Gerald Bennett, mayor of Palos Hills, said the best government is local government and that local municipalities often push the envelope without waiting for the federal government.

"The best lobbyist is you," Mayor Bennett said about citizens. "You can get in front of a state legislature and make a difference."

This is part of the February 25, 2010 online edition of The Regional.

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