

Continuing Education

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By appointment of the Speaker of the House of Delegates I am one of Virginia's representatives to the annual meeting of the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL). This year's meeting is smaller than previous ones as all states including Virginia have reduced the size of their delegates because of budget limitations. The host state of California has the most serious situation with a budget deficit of \$38 billion, ten times that of Virginia, and the Governor who was just re-elected last year faces a likely recall election.

The importance of the annual meeting may well have been enhanced as state representatives get together to discuss ways to deal with a faltering economy and declining revenues as the federal government continues to force more responsibilities on the states through devolution. All states report that Medicaid is among the fastest growing of their expenses, and even Virginia which has kept its Medicaid reimbursements rates among the lowest in the country has seen a steady and strong growth in costs.

Anti-tax sentiments are strong across the states but are confronted by the cost of core services. States do not have the incurrence of seemingly endless debt as the federal government does, and most states are like Virginia with requirements of a balanced annual budget and strict constitutional limits on any amount of debt.

A tour of Silicon Valley with visits to Cisco Systems Headquarters, e-Bay where CEO Meg Whitman showed us around, and Microsoft offered hope that the economy may be rebounding. There continues to be a great number of vacant buildings with "For Lease" signs. The four lanes of heavy traffic in both directions make you wonder what getting around is like in times of stronger employment in the Valley.

Joining legislators from all 50 states at the NCSL annual meeting are representatives of hundreds of associations, businesses and interest groups who seek to influence the outcome of legislation in the states. The information these people provide is invaluable to the legislative process. Legislators must recognize the special interests represented by these lobbyists and be able to determine where the public's interests are best served among competing interests.

Already I have picked up ideas on public-private partnerships, environmental protections, tax policies and other topics. The conference serves its purpose in providing continuing education for this legislator.