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City officials go to Washington, D.C. for conference

By Julie Becker
Daily News staff writer

Event involves meeting with representatives, discussing legislative issues with other cities

Each year representatives from cities throughout the nation congregate in Washington, D.C., for the National League of Cities Congressional City Conference, to learn about upcoming legislative issues and meet with Congressional representatives for their areas.

City Manager Larry Arft and Beloit City Council Vice President Kevin Leavy will be attending the annual conference this weekend, and their agenda will be packed full of important issues.

"The purpose of the conference is to get all of the municipal officers into Washington once a year to get briefings and updates on important legislative issues that might impact the city," Arft said Thursday. "It's a very interesting and educational event."

Some of the major issues Arft sees being discussed this year include funding for Community Development Block Grants - which has faced the threat of cuts in the past - public health services, potential issues with cable television providers and other regulatory and public policy issues.

The issue of funding post-retirement health care benefits - one that Beloit is facing, in light of a recent requirement change by the Governmental Accounting Standards Board - could come up, among other issues, Arft said, but it is unlikely to be discussed in detail. The city is still examining its options with regards to funding those costs, he added.

Ensuring the city's requests for funding are addressed will be a big part of the weekend's itinerary, though.

Arft and Leavy have scheduled a meeting Tuesday with staff from the offices of both U.S. Rep. Tammy Baldwin and Senator Herb Kohl, to lobby for the funding Beloit needs and discuss pertinent issues, including the Beloit Casino.

Funding will be requested for the water tower project on the west side of the city, continued support in the form of non-military Homeland Security for the Beloit Fire Department and a \$375,000 "ShotSpotter" system, which would help the Beloit Police Department immediately pinpoint the location of shots fired.

"It allows police to set up detectors in different neighborhoods and will give the exact location of shots fired. They don't have to wait for phone calls and will be able to respond directly to where it happens and confirm it in all cases," Arft explained. "It would allow them to respond to the scene immediately and hopefully catch these perpetrators, which would be great."

Arft and Leavy will also be discussing their options for scheduling meetings with key staff involved in the federal review process for the Beloit Casino, including Associate Deputy Secretary of the Interior James Cason and Secretary of the Interior Dirk Kempthorne, Arft said.

The pair will also meet in their respective committees for the National League of Cities. Arft belongs to the International City/County Management Association and Leavy serves on the National Black Caucus of Local Elected Officials.

They will leave for Washington, D.C., this afternoon, and are scheduled to return to Beloit Tuesday evening.

For more information on the 2007 National League of Cities Congressional City Conference, held March 10-14, and a schedule of events for the weekend, visit www.nlc.org/Conferences___Events/Congressional_City_Conference.