Using White House Conference recommendations

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Just when I thought the momentum of the White House Conference was subsiding, I learned of two specific events that convinced me otherwise. The first event was a Public Roundtable sponsored by Hilda Mason, councilwoman for the District of Columbia and chair of the Committee on Education and Libraries.

On November 18, 1991, in the City Council chamber, Mason brought together interested citizens who spoke in favor of specific agenda items that emerged from the Mayor's Pre-White House Conference on Library and Information Services. Witnesses were grouped by interests such as public library issues, academic library concerns, preservation priorities, etc.

Four academic librarians spoke, offering the perspectives of public and private institutions as well as the needs in both the District of Columbia and the nation. The librarians were Albert Casciero, director, and John Page, deputy director of the Learning Resource Center, University of the District of Columbia; and George Arnold, university archivist and head, special collections, and Patricia Wand, university librarian, the American University. They were asked to cite and discuss specific recommendations that need attention by local and national governments.

The second event that reminded me of the significance and momentum of the White House Conference is recounted below by Lynn Scott Cochrane:

Recently I had a chance to take my own advice, which appeared in last month’s C&RL News (December 1991) and utilize the White House Conference recommendations in quite a unique forum.

The 1991 First Amendment Congress convened at the Virginia State Capitol Building on Sunday October 27, 1991, in the very rooms where the Bill of Rights was adopted in December 1791. Most speakers also served as facilitators for topic group sessions, where resolutions were written.

The conference attracted several hundred participants, many of them journalists and lawyers. Librarians numbered four, all from Virginia and representing the Virginia Library Association and ALA.

Included among attendees were retired Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court, Warren E. Burger; Robert O'Neil, director of the Thomas Jefferson Center for the Protection of Free Expression and former president of the University of Virginia; Hodding Carter III, president of MainStreet and former assistant secretary of state for public affairs; Suzanne Schafer, military affairs correspondent for the Associated Press; and others.

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When I attended the first group meeting on “Access to Government Information in the Electronic Age,” I took along a copy of the WHCLISII recommendations. It turned out that the members were thrilled to have language already written upon which we could draw for resolutions. In particular, WHCLISII Recommendation No. ACC04-1, which calls for Congress to amend the Freedom of Information Act, was used as a prototype for one of the First Amendment Congress resolutions.

The resolution on amending the Freedom of Information Act calls for a national conference to draft strategies for addressing the complex problems of electronic access to government information at all levels. Library associations, including ALA, will be invited to participate in the national conference, and the WHCLISII recommendations will undoubtedly be useful once again.

Other WHCLISII recommendations that were useful in our discussions include those regarding open access to government information regardless of format (NIP03-1) and inappropriate classification of public information (NIP03-4).