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One Voice leaders in Washington D.C.

By Michael Doyle / SUN-STAR WASHINGTON BUREAU

WASHINGTON--Some Merced County leaders are learning on the job this week as they seek millions of dollars in federal aid.

With guidance from professional lobbyists, as well as some lessons recalled from previous Capitol Hill trips, two dozen city and county officials are on the prowl. It's a practical education, in a highly competitive world.

"You have to be versed in Washington's language, in what they are looking for," Monica White, executive director of the Merced County Healthcare Coalition, said Tuesday. "I guess you could call it learning a second language." White is a first-time participant in the Merced County Association of Government's "One Voice" trip, an annual exercise now undertaken by many California counties. Though details differ, the general One Voice idea dispatches county representatives who have rallied around common priorities.

White, for instance, has the Merced County delegation's backing for a \$750,000 request to boost local mental health programs and a \$500,000 request to attract more local health care workers.

The health care projects, in turn, are only a small part of the county's overall package of requests. The wish list ranges from \$750,000 for career programs at the new Pacheco High School in Los Banos and \$500,000 for flood control along Black Rascal Creek to \$27 million for continued construction of the Campus Parkway serving UC Merced.

The One Voice delegation members make their various pitches in meetings with congressional staffers, federal agency administrators and an occasional lawmaker.

"If we can't get money to alleviate the problems, then at least we're bringing it to their attention," White said.

Sometimes, the lobbying visits can resemble preaching to the choir, particularly as the delegation members meet with local members of Congress. Often, the visitors must make do with staff-level meetings, as when the Merced County delegation met in a busy hallway with a staffer for Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein.

"You learn that when you get into a meeting, you've got an allotted time block," said Merced Mayor Bill Spriggs, a veteran of previous One Voice trips. "There's not a lot of time to make your point."

Occasionally, the sessions can be a slap in the face.

This week, the Merced County officials say they heard in no uncertain terms that the Department of Housing and Urban Development lacked the flexibility to provide Neighborhood Stabilization Program funds directly to cities like Merced and Los Banos.

The program provides federal funding for cities to buy and renovate foreclosed homes and then resell them.

Though the Merced County cities are burdened with extremely high unemployment and housing foreclosure rates, federal officials say they are still ineligible for direct funding. Instead, they must wait for funds that first pass through the state government.

Consequently, Los Banos City Councilwoman Elizabeth Stone said her city didn't receive a \$2.4 million payment until December, even though the neighborhood stabilization funds had arrived in Sacramento the previous March. A meeting with HUD officials this week failed to change the federal funding policy.

"It got quite passionate," said Marjie Kirn, deputy executive director of the Merced County Association of Governments.

Still, Stone added, the HUD meeting and others like it that began Monday and concluded Wednesday served a valuable purpose.

"It's important for those at the federal level to stay connected with what's happening at the local level," Stone said.