



Young Ithaca, Tompkins County elected officials network at White House event

*By Alexandra Evans | Ithaca Times correspondent
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Last Friday, June 17, 200 of the nation's young elected officials took over 16 rooms in the East side of the White House. They were invited to talk policy with members of the Obama administration in the nation's capitol.

City aldermen Svante Myrick and Eddie Rooker, county legislator Nathan Shinagawa and Caroline town board member Dominic Frongillo were four of 200 people invited through the People for the American Way Foundation's Young Elected Officials Network to the policy briefing and reception with the president.



Myrick, Rooker and Frongillo at White House. Ithaca aldermen Svante Myrick, left, and Eddie Rooker, and Caroline town board member Domonic Frongillo pose with the bust of Abraham Lincoln and an "Ithaca is GORGES" T-shirt while attending a young elected officials event at the White House in Washington, D.C.

"[It was] an opportunity for us to provide the voice of our constituents directly to the White House," Frongillo said. "It says a lot that the administration is interested in listening. It shows that we're not just future leaders, but we're leaders right now." The first part of the event was a three-hour policy briefing with members of the Obama administration.

"[It] very specific, hard on details," Shinagawa said. "It shows that the president understands that climate change is a real issue, and secondly, that the economy needs to be turned around, and third, that innovation doesn't have to cost the government the money."

The local officials said they came to the policy briefing prepared to press the administration about natural gas drilling.

"The administration has been proponents of gas drilling," Myrick said. "We wanted them to do more, specifically about EPA. We want them to regulate hydrofracking and force

companies to disclose the chemicals they use, and we asked them if they have any plans to do that.”

Frongillo said he and a councilmember from Pittsburgh pressed the administration the hardest about fracking.

“The administration calls gas a clean transition fuel,” Frongillo said. “I wanted to make sure that if they are saying that, they are aware that it’s actually not clean according to the latest research.”

Myrick said the officials answered that they were “looking into” the issue, which they recognized as being a big problem in the Northeast.

“I wasn’t entirely happy [with their answer],” Shinagawa said. “They need to be more specific about how they’re going to change the greenhouse gas emissions reductions plans. That EPA study really needs to reflect all of the recent discoveries that we’ve had about the hazards of natural gas.”

Nevertheless, Shinagawa said he was pleased that the group of four, as well as their colleague who is a councilperson from Pittsburgh, “dominated question and answer with the president’s top climate change person on the issue of fracking.”

“Every time one of our people asked a question, the crowd — 200 elected officials from around the country — clapped full of energy, trying to show the administration how big of an issue this is. That’s really powerful that we spoke and we made that the top issue.”

Another main aspect of the policy briefing was a presentation by Obama’s chief technology officer about the freeing of government information and education data for entrepreneurs to use.

The officials said the officer talked about how the White House released information about car seats, prompting one young person to create an iPod application with GPS technology that allows parents to search for the closest locations to fix their car seats.

In addition to using this previously hidden data for useful tools to help citizens in their every day lives, the officer noted that it can also be used for novelty purposes.

“NASA opened up all of their topographical information about every mountain in the world,” Shinagawa said. “They freed this information, made it public and EA Sports used that for the video game, so when you play this video game, you are going down a mountain and that mountain is the actual mountain, boulder by boulder.”

Myrick, Shinawaga and Frongillo said this report on using technology for innovation was where they gained the most insight to bring back to their local government positions.

“If we unlocked all of the data we have, it could really expand services and change people’s lives for the better without spending any more money,” Myrick said. “A lot of what he was saying we could use right here in the city in Tompkins County.”

Rooker said he enjoyed the opportunity to network with other elected officials and get a sense of what similar problems local governments from across the nation were facing.

“It was nice to see those issues that are big in Tompkins County are also being voice elsewhere,” he said.

Overall , Shinagawa said the meeting was powerful and positive.

“Often times, people think we’re too young to able to make a difference,” Shinagawa said. “We still sometimes get told ‘oh you’re too young to understand this issue or you don’t have enough experience.’ It’s great that the president of the United States recognizes that we have the experience and we have the ability to make a difference here. We’re old enough to know, but we’re young enough to do.”