

AS SEEN IN ROLL CALL:

K St. Hopeful About Hill Access

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The American League of Lobbyists is “cautiously optimistic” that they will soon receive passes designated for frequent visitors allowing them access to the Capitol without a specific appointment. If granted, the badges or cards would be the realization of many months of effort by the league. Last year they sought and received a meeting with Capitol Police Chief Terrance Gainer about the issue and told him they would be willing to be subjected to background checks if it meant they could have the same access as the credentialed press.

A House source familiar with the process said discussions were still at the staff level but that the issue has gained some momentum, partially because ALL has worked hard to raise awareness of the issue. “Everybody likes the idea of more access” to the building, especially after admittance for everyone except Members and staff was severely curtailed after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the source said. “But when you get down to logistics, it gets more difficult. How we are going to do that is still very up in the air.” Issues such as who could get the cards, who would pay for them and to what exactly they would be allowed access are just some of the details still being discussed. The source said the “building access cards” of the 1980s would not be making a repeat appearance. The BAC cards, as they were known, got dubbed “buying a Congressman” cards for the access they allowed to relatively restricted places. Nonetheless, procedures for better access for lobbyists and other frequent visitors are in the “budding stages,” the source said. A Senate aide, however, said such talk hasn’t reached that side of the Capitol.

ALL President Deanna Gelak emphasized that the “frequent business passes” that the organization is seeking are not just for lobbyists but also for individuals who often come to the Hill on official business. “This would be for those, not just lobbyists, but all of us who frequently conduct their work on Capitol Hill,” Gelak said this week. “We do believe that a system can be developed to meet the twin goals of heightened security and appropriate access. We’re cautiously optimistic.” Gelak said her organization has met with “all the key players,” including House Administration and the Capitol Police, and has begun conversations with the Senate Rules and Administration Committee. A spokesman for the House Administration Committee said officials had nothing to announce at this point other than to say that “security officials are looking at a number of proposals” and they “are talking to interested parties and will continue to talk to them.”

As it stands now, lobbyists and other visitors on official business cannot get into the Capitol or office buildings without an appointment except through certain entrances designed primarily for tourists. The security measures have proved especially onerous because the East Front Plaza is closed, Gelak said. “The construction of the Capitol Visitor Center has exacerbated the access problem since information providers and government affairs professionals have to walk around the entire East Front of the Capitol” to get from one side of the complex to the other, Gelak added. She suggested the restrictions are part of an endemic problem restricting the access of “citizen watchdogs” and complained that “press can get in to key House and Senate Capitol events but lobbyists can’t.” “We are also concerned about the long-term corrosive effect on the process of the new restrictions,” she said of the measures implemented in the past year and a half.

House Administration spokesman Brian Walsh responded that Capitol officials have been focused 100 percent on security for months. “But while security continues to be our top priority, we are always looking to increase access to the Capitol. It’s the people’s house, and we are always looking for ways to keep the doors open,” he said. At the meeting last year, Gainer said he was open to the league’s ideas, but he emphasized that security issues were separate from policy decisions regarding lobbyists’ access to lawmakers. “Whether you should be in there is a different issue. How you get from point A to point B is an issue I’m very interested in,” he said, referring to the restrictions on use of the tunnels between the office buildings and the Capitol to individuals with Congressionally issued IDs. Access for lobbyists, Gainer said,

is ultimately up to the House and Senate leadership, along with the Architect of the Capitol and the House and Senate Sergeants -at-Arms. For their part, the lobbyists maintained that they are as much a part of the institution as anyone else who frequents the Hill. "We're there every day," ALL board member William Edington said, framing the issue as a question of access for "those who are doing business here every day and those who are here on vacation."