

Lobbyists Get Carded

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By Suzanne Nelson, Roll Call Staff

After more than a year spent pressing Congressional officials for less-cumbersome access to the Capitol, lobbyists and other frequent visitors finally got at least a portion of what they wanted in the form of new "transit" cards. The passes, which became available for the first time this week, allow visitors on official business to walk between meetings on the House and Senate sides of the building without having to go outside and re-enter through security.

The transit passes are available to anyone with official business on both sides of the Capitol, but the American League of Lobbyists have made the issue of access a high priority. The group began petitioning the Capitol Police as well as the House Administration and Senate Rules and Administration committees after access was severely restricted for individuals without Congressionally issued IDs following the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. "It's a common-sense initiative," said Brian Walsh, spokesman for House Administration Chairman Bob Ney (R-Ohio), who made the decision with Senate Rules and both chambers' Sergeant-at-Arms. "The chairman recognizes the frustrations that some feel to enter and re-enter the Capitol, but he wanted to work to ensure that security was not compromised," he said. Walsh emphasized that visitors on official business would still have to check in at each chamber's appointment desk and reminded lobbyists and others that the transit cards aren't daylong passes. "The Capitol Police will still ensure that visitors on official business still make their transit in a timely fashion" and make sure they don't use the passes to enter restricted areas, he said.

ALL President Deanna Gelak called the transit cards "a very encouraging first step." About a year ago, ALL started the Citizens for Equal Access Coalition to "restore timely and secure access for citizens who regularly visit the House and Senate," Gelak said. The coalition includes groups such as the American Veterans, American Association of People with Disabilities, International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers (part of the AFL-CIO) and National Fire Protection Association. ALL has continually maintained that lobbyists and other frequent visitors should be treated differently from tourists when entering and transversing the Capitol and pointed out that reporters are given credentials allowing them access similar to that of staff. Gelak said her group's efforts come "in light of our citizens' First Amendment rights to petition their government." Gelak added that lobbyists still face obstacles in moving around the Capitol campus, especially because of their inability to use the underground tunnels. She said ALL members are willing to pay a "reasonable fee" to undergo background checks in order to receive some sort of "frequent visitor pass," which they would like to be similar to credentials issued to members of the media. The group outlined its agenda last year in a meeting with Capitol Police Chief Terrance Gainer, who told them the policy issues weren't his decision. As it stands, lobbyists and other visitors on official business cannot get into the Capitol or office buildings without an appointment except through designated entrances, many of which are often flooded with tourists. The issue is not without political undertones, however, as access for lobbyists — even if it is lumped together with that of other frequent visitors — is a thorny one. The House-issued Building Access Cards of the 1980s were widely dubbed "Buy a Congressman" cards because of the access they granted to areas restricted to the general public, including the hallways outside the Cloakrooms and the House floor. The Republican leadership announced an end to the BACs — more than 6,000 of which were issued from the House Sergeant-at-Arms office — soon after taking control of the chamber in 1995. "We want to prevent special access for some people who want to petition their government and not others," Rep. Jim Nussle (R-Iowa) said at the time. "My mother, for example, should have no greater or less access than any lobbyist. What's good enough for the public is good enough for lobbyists."