

Capitol Tunnels Reopen to Visitors on Official Business

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Lobbyists and other frequent visitors to Capitol Hill regained a small but significant means of access last week when Congressional officials announced such guests would be allowed to use underground tunnels connecting the Capitol to its office buildings.

“This change is designed to facilitate Official-Business Visitor flow between the office buildings and the Capitol in a controlled and secure manner,” House Administration Committee leaders wrote in a “Dear Colleague” letter issued Thursday.

The announcement follows an October 2003 decision to provide visitors on official business with “transit” cards, which allow them to walk between meetings on the Senate and House sides of the Capitol without having to exit the building and then re-enter through security.

Under the new guidelines — agreed to by both chambers’ Sergeants-at-Arms, the Capitol Police and the House Administration and Senate Rules and Administration panels — visitors also will be permitted to make use of the underground tunnels connecting the House and Senate office buildings to the Capitol.

House Administration Chairman Bob Ney (R-Ohio) said the decision to re-open the tunnels is part of a larger initiative to maintain accessibility to the Capitol, a process that has included the resumption of tours of the Capitol Dome. Access to the Capitol and its office buildings was severely restricted following the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

“This is falling in line with the Speaker’s idea, which he has said many times,” Ney said. “He wants safety and security but he wants the people’s house open as much as it can be.”

The new procedure will also decrease the number of visitors Capitol Police must essentially “double screen,” Ney said.

The Ohio lawmaker estimated that between 400 and 500 visitors are screened at least twice daily because they must exit the Capitol to meet with Members or staff and are rescreened when entering the office buildings, or vice versa.

Under the new policy, “Official-Business Visitors” — those with verified appointments or meetings in the Capitol or Congressional office building — will be allowed to access the tunnels weekdays between 9 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. Each visitor must also present photo identification to the House or Senate Appointments Desk and is required to wear an identification sticker listing his or her destination.

The American League of Lobbyists, which has favored providing greater access to Capitol grounds, praised the decision as a “very positive step.”

“It will help citizens with meetings to move a little more freely,” said ALL President Deanna Gelak. “This is especially appreciated with summer approaching.”

In the meantime, Gelak said her organization will continue to seek the creation of a more permanent identification for frequent visitors, such as those issued to the media.

“We’ve always been hopeful that those could be developed and we’ll continue to push for those and any other additional step which would continue to allow those [visitors] with meetings or official business to move more freely around the complex,” Gelak said.

"If necessary we are willing to pay a reasonable fee for appropriate processing and clearance for an access card similar to those issued to the press," she added.

The Capitol Police, House Sergeant-at-Arms and House Administration panel have considered the possibility of frequent visitor IDs, but have not made any decision.

"Those are ongoing discussions we have for identification IDs for people who would be utilizing the Capitol," Ney said.

In 1995 the House halted the use of its Building Access Cards, widely dubbed "Buy a Congressman" cards because of the access they granted to holders — such as hallways outside of cloakrooms and the House floor — for areas largely restricted to the general public.