

300th ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION



STAFF PHOTO BY MATT OOLEY/mooley@thejournalnet.com

Happy birthday, Ben

Impersonator helps Franklin honor city's namesake; Tuesday celebrations mark inventor's tercentenary



AP PHOTO

Above: Coins in the shape of "300" sit on the grave of Benjamin Franklin and his wife, Deborah, in Philadelphia on Tuesday.

Top: Franklin impersonator Phil A. Tunnah talks to students during a class at Franklin College on Tuesday.

Right: Actor Ralph Archbold, portraying Franklin, smiles as confetti falls to the ground Tuesday during a party in Philadelphia to celebrate Franklin's 300th birthday. Philadelphia was the celebratory hub, hosting 85 events that include Ben's Birthday Bash at the National Liberty Museum and a gala parade to his grave.



AP PHOTO

House leaders announce plans to restrict favors from lobbyists

By JIM ABRAMS
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON

House Speaker Dennis Hastert urged new restrictions on gifts from lobbyists Tuesday, responding to a scandal that already has claimed two Republican leaders and raised GOP fears about this year's elections.



ABRAMOFF



HASTERT

Hastert, confronting a political crisis spawned by the Jack Abramoff scandal, promoted legislation that would end the practices of lobbyists footing the bill for lunches or arranging lavish "fact-finding" trips for members of Congress to warm-weather resorts.

Lawmakers-turned-lobbyists would be banned from the House floor, where they have been known to make deals in hopes of changing votes.

House Rules Committee Chairman David Dreier, R-Calif., who is spearheading the lobbying overhaul effort for Hastert, said the goal was to pass legislation by the end of February. He said it would include the forfeiture of congressional pensions for members convicted of a felony related to official duties.

"The problems we have been reading about stem from violation of existing rules," Hastert, R-Ill.,

said in apparent reference to Abramoff, who sought to influence lawmakers through donations, meals at his high-priced restaurant, golfing trips and skybox seats. Abramoff has pleaded guilty to corruption-related charges and is cooperating with prosecutors.

Democrats, who are unveiling their own lobbying ethics package today, chided Republicans for addressing the issue only after the Abramoff controversy helped bring down two senior Republicans and cast a shadow on fall's elections.

Former Majority Leader Tom DeLay, R-Texas, who had stepped down from his post after being indicted on campaign finance charges in Texas, decided against trying to regain his job after the guilty plea of Abramoff, with whom he had long had ties. And Rep. Bob Ney, R-Ohio, another recipient of benefits from Abramoff's clients, has temporarily given up his chairmanship of the House Administration Committee.

"For more than a decade, Speaker Hastert and House Republicans have benefited from their systemic culture of corruption at the expense of the American people," House Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi said. "Today, the Republicans' so-called lobbying reform proposal sticks a Band-Aid on a gaping wound."

The staffs in the offices of Senate Democratic leader Harry Reid of Nevada and Democratic Whip Richard Durbin of Illinois have already been told that they should set an example and immediately stop accepting all gifts, meals or travel from lobbyists.

Within minutes of Hastert's news conference, Republican senators met with reporters to announce Senate plans for quick action on lobbying reform.

Problem-plagued drug plan a headache for Republicans

By TOM RAUM
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON

The Medicare drug program that was supposed to win political points for Republicans has exploded in their faces as this election year has begun. It's a particularly vexing problem for the GOP, since older Americans are such active voters and no one seeking office wants to see them angry.

Since the Bush administration's prescription medicine program began Jan. 1, tens of thousands of elderly people have been unable to get medicines promised by the government. Some 20 states have had to jump in to help them.

Under the program, about 42 million disabled and older people are eligible to enroll in private plans that will subsidize their prescription drug costs. The sign-up period closes May 15.

The administration has pledged to persuade the insurance plans to repay those states that have jumped in to help. Many states have agreed to pick up temporarily the cost of prescription drugs for low-income seniors and others turned away at pharmacies because of confusion in the new program. The administration also told insurance companies that they must provide at least a 30-day supply of drugs to beneficiaries.

Health and Human Services Secretary Michael Leavitt said Tuesday that about 24 million people

are enrolled in the plan and that "for the vast majority, it is working very well." But he acknowledged there were "a couple of small groups it's not working well for," including some low-income people.

Republicans fear that, if the problems aren't fixed quickly, their political woes could mount, especially once enrollment closes May 15. Some Republicans, inside and outside the White House, have discussed moving back the deadline until later in the year.

Critics compare the measure to the complicated Clinton health-care plan that failed in Congress, and to an earlier plan passed by a Democratic-controlled Congress in the late-1980s providing catastrophic medical benefits, but requiring wealthier older Americans to pay a surcharge for them. The bill was quickly repealed.

"It's a very complicated program," said Paul C. Light, a professor of public service at New York University. "If the president and the Cabinet had to enroll, I think they might soon find out that this is a very tangled web of promises that are difficult to unravel."

And it isn't only older voters that plan supporters have to fear. "A lot of parents are getting help from their kids, many of whom are baby boomers. And they also vote," Light said.

Three Sept. 11 workers die in seven months

Families claim men obtained illnesses from ground zero

The Associated Press

NEW YORK

James Zadroga spent 16 hours a day toiling in the World Trade Center ruins for a month, breathing in debris-choked air. Timothy Keller said he coughed up bits of gravel from his lungs after the towers fell on Sept. 11, 2001. Felix Hernandez spent days at the site helping to search for victims.

All three men died in the past seven months of what their families and colleagues say were persistent respiratory illnesses directly caused by their work at ground zero.

While thousands of people who either worked at or lived near the site have reported ailments such as "trade center cough" since the terrorist attacks, some say that only now are the consequences of working at the site

becoming heartbreakingly clear.

"I'm very fearful," said Donald Faeth, an emergency medical technician and officer in a union with two of the ground zero workers who died last year. "I think that there are several people who died that day and didn't realize that they died that day."

Some officials say it is too early to draw that conclusion. Doctors running different health-screening programs say it will take decades to get a clear picture of the long-term health effects of working at ground zero.

The city Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, which is tracking the health of 71,000 people exposed to Sept. 11 dust and debris, said last week that it is too soon to say whether any deaths or illnesses among its enrolled members are linked to trade center exposure.

But Robin Herbert, who directs a medical-monitoring program at Mount Sinai Medical Center for more than 14,000 ground zero workers, said it is not inconceivable that a person could die of respiratory disease related to Sept. 11.

David Worby, an attorney representing more

than 5,000 plaintiffs suing those who supervised the cleanup over their illnesses, said 21 of his clients have died of Sept. 11-related diseases since mid-2004. He said he was not authorized to release their names, but represented people who toiled at ground zero, at the Fresh Kills landfill in Staten Island where trade center debris was moved, and at the city morgue.

"This is just the tip of the iceberg," Worby said. "Many, many more people are going to die from the aftermath of the toxicity."

Rep. Jerrold Nadler, whose congressional district includes the trade center site, blames some of the illnesses on the failure to provide some workers with proper masks or respiratory protection. A Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study found in 2004 that one in five workers wore respirators while they worked at the site to block out dust laced with asbestos, glass fibers, pulverized cement and other substances.

"All the people exposed should be monitored for life so that we know what happened," Nadler said.

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