

ROLL CALL

Parties Vie for Edge on K St.

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With control of the House in the balance, the two parties have begun corralling their allies on K Street in a bid to strengthen ties going into the pivotal midterm elections.

On Monday, top Democratic House staffers huddled with about 25 prominent Democratic lobbyists, just days after the chief of the House GOP campaign committee urged corporate allies to resist the impulse to give to Democrats as a way of hedging their bets.

The House Democrats' unusually broad outreach effort Monday gave lobbyists a preview of the agenda for the remaining weeks of the session.

Those in attendance said the meeting — which took place in the offices of Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) — was light on specifics. Instead, lobbyists were assured that party leaders want them involved in the process and welcome their input.

"It was to say, 'We need to more actively reach out to you and want to work with you,'" said one lobbyist who attended the meeting. "It was a recognition that people around the room have some good input."

Staffers made no appeals for political contributions or other campaign help, said the lobbyists in attendance, adding that no one from K Street tried to press any client business in return.

"Nobody has any illusions that Democrats are going to be better for K Street," said another lobbyist there, speaking privately. "We're very mindful of the fact Democrats are never going to run the place the way the Republicans do. But they'll have an open door to people, and we'll have a chance to come in and make our case."

The gathering, which lasted about an hour, brought together staffers representing a cross-section of the House Democratic Caucus. It included John Lawrence, Pelosi's chief of staff, and Bill Cable, chief of staff to Minority Whip Steny Hoyer (Md.), in addition to senior committee staffers and aides to members of the Blue Dog Coalition and the New Democrat Coalition.

Lobbyists in attendance likewise ranged in their backgrounds and industry sectors, including Chuck Brain from Capitol Hill Strategies, Broderick Johnson from BellSouth, Jack Quinn from Quinn Gillespie & Associates, Dan Tate Jr. from Capitol Solutions and Dan Turton from Timmons and Co.

"It was talking with people downtown about how the lines of communication are open," said Pelosi spokeswoman Jennifer Crider. She added that one issue discussed was Pelosi's commitment to a more bipartisan process if Democrats were to retake control of the House "and how, no matter who is Speaker next Congress, they ought to enact civility principles."

House Democratic leadership aides already meet irregularly with a small group of senior Democratic lobbyists, most of whom once worked in leadership themselves. But attendees of the Monday huddle said they understood it to be the first of a broader, if still irregular, conference with downtown allies.

The Democrats' outreach comes as the party steps up pressure on lobbyists to contribute to their election efforts, mirroring a similar push from the GOP. However, the Republicans' message is as much about urging donations to their party as it is about trying to scare off lobbyists and political action committee directors from spreading some of their cash to Democrats.

The latest GOP example came in a briefing late last week with National Republican Congressional Committee chairman Tom Reynolds (N.Y.), who told a standing-room-only crowd of K Street advocates and political action committee heads not to give to Democrats, according to two sources at the meeting.

Many lobbyists and PAC directors say they'll do what the political realities dictate, no matter the heavy-handed tactics.

"The business community has seen this before, and they will hedge their bets no matter who threatens them," said one Republican business lobbyist.

According to one source at the Reynolds meeting — a Republican who is the director of an association PAC — Reynolds told the crowd, "For those of you thinking about hedging your bets, I am watching you and I am going to know." Another source who attended the briefing with Reynolds said the NRCC chairman made it clear that the entire Republican Conference would also know of companies or associations whose PAC-giving ratio shifted from Republican to Democratic.

"We will have no choice but to report to the Republican Conference any changes in your pattern of giving," this source said he recalled Reynolds as saying.

"I was just surprised he was that blatant about it," the first meeting source said. "If it

had happened two years ago, it wouldn't have been a surprise, but in the whole era we're in now and in light of certain things that have gone on, I was surprised."

NRCC spokesman Carl Forti declined to comment about the Thursday meeting, saying it was private.

Forti said he has no idea what will happen to those companies or groups who shift their giving away from Republicans and toward Democrats. "I would say that their switch would be noticed," he said. "I don't know exactly what it means. All I know is it will get noticed."

Pelosi spokeswoman Crider said there is a difference between Reynolds' message and the effort by Democrats to invite lobbyists' input.

"What it sounds like the Republicans were doing was levying a threat to K Street," she said. "What we're saying is, if you have an idea on an issue we have some commonality on, the lines of communication are open."

The Reynolds meeting, according to both sources, lasted more than an hour, featured cookies and soda, but no handouts, and was attended by a half-dozen candidates including Michele Bachmann, who is running for the seat being vacated by GOP Rep. Mark Kennedy in Minnesota; Mike Whalen, who is running for an open seat in Iowa; Jeff Lamberti, who is challenging Rep. Leonard Boswell (D-Iowa); and Randy Graf, who is running for an open seat in Arizona.

The PAC director source who attended the Reynolds meeting said that any perceived threats aside, it's hard for many business interests to find Democrats worthy of supporting.

"We would love to support 50 Democrats," the PAC director said. "But it's just really hard when they consistently vote against you on every single issue. When we find Democrats that are supportive, we're there, but the list is small."

One top Republican lobbyist said that if Republicans are heavy-handed about not giving to Democrats, the Democrats are sending an equally strong message of "you better hedge your bets."

"Everybody's aware that the microscope is on them from both sides. The threat of 'we're watching your giving' now applies to both sides," this lobbyist added. "We basically are supporting people who support us, no matter what their party is."

But this lobbyist said he and other leaders at companies and groups are recommending that PACs keep extra cash on hand for after the elections to help the party that ultimately takes control of the House retire some of its campaign debt.

David Bolger, director of public relations for UPS' Washington, D.C., office, said no one from UPS attended last week's NRCC meeting, but the company's PAC officials regularly meet with Members from both sides.

"We base our giving not on those types of statements but primarily on where the Members of Congress are, are they pro-business, pro-global free trade, pro-competition," Bolger said.

Bill Burton, Forti's counterpart at the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, said Reynolds' comments don't surprise him.

"Tom Reynolds is threatening anybody he could in an effort to hold on to power," Burton said. "I sort of feel for him. He's up against a wave of unpopularity, and it's going to cost a lot."

The director of a major PAC that strongly leans Republican also said Reynolds' comments came as no surprise. "The Democrats are going around reminding everyone that they might be in power," this PAC director said. "Our numbers maybe were a little up to Democrats, but nothing shocking."

Ken Gross, a lobbying and campaign finance expert at Skadden Arps Slate Meagher & Flom, said if Reynolds' statements were accurately recalled, they would not likely count as an ethics violation.

"A public official would have to use his official position or cloak of authority to extract contributions based on using that authority to deny or promise a specific benefit to the contributor— a quid pro quo is required," he said. "This is a far cry from any such violation. I know of no ethics violations with such an implicit statement that would be breached by that."

Stanley Brand, another ethics expert, agreed with Gross. But, he said, "I guess in this environment, with a Department of Justice task force going, they probably should be more careful."

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