

'Real people' have their say

Amateurs get floor on Lobby Night

By Sean Scully
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

If there is such a thing as amateur night in this city of professional politicians, it's Monday night.

On Monday nights — "Lobby Night" — both houses of the General Assembly meet in special sessions at 8 p.m. The late opening — while troublesome for legislators, staff, and deadline-pressed media organizations — offers Maryland residents a unique chance to meet and lobby elected officials during off hours.

The atmosphere is slightly different from daytime lawmaking. Dress is a little more casual, legislators a little more relaxed and the air is full of enticing snippets of conversation.

"That means we have a very narrow window of opportunity," explains one Lobby Night vet as she leads a group of determined-looking younger women in search of legislators through the House office building.

"And this is the president of the lodge. We've come down here tonight to talk," says another voice from a delegate's office.

Grass-roots lobbyists turn out by the dozens, even the hundreds, on Lobby Night.

"I think it's great they take the time to be available for you at night," said Natalie Bono, 30, an Aspen Hill waitress who turned



Students from St. Pius X take part in Lobby Night. They want more money for private schools.

out one Monday night to lobby on motorcycle-related issues. "A lot of us work during the day."

"Yeah, if you can find someone to talk to" at night, said Mike Sage, 33, a Rockville machinist and assistant legislative director of Maryland ABATE (A Brotherhood Advancing Teaching and Education), a motorcycle-rights group.

Many legislators, he said, are so tied up at receptions Monday nights that they are hard to find.

"Sometimes we have our own reception, lure 'em in," Gaithersburg electrical designer Joe Moltz, 54, said. "Wine and dine 'em."

"Not wine — that gets expensive," Mr. Sage said.

"Ritz cracker and Coke 'em," amended Damascus grocery store manager Jeff Klasek, 43.

Lawmakers say they enjoy the change of pace.

"I'm not one for professional lobbyists ... I definitely like the

amateur aspect of it," said Delegate Raymond Beck, Montgomery County Democrat.

"I'm just impressed with their demeanor, their presentation and their commitment to their issues," said Delegate David Rudolph, Cecil County Democrat.

Mass rallies are a staple of Lobby Night. Usually a crowd gathers in Lawyer's Square, at the foot of the State House steps, at about 6:30 p.m.

Lobby night "sounds like a great idea ... I usually don't get home from work until 6," said Don Blair, 38, a Baltimore mechanic. Mr. Blair, a first-time visitor to the legislature, was among hundreds of parents who turned out for a private-school funding rally Feb. 3.

"It gives the typical population, real people, the chance to meet with legislators and tell them what's on their minds," said Bill Blaul, spokesman for the Archdiocese of Baltimore, one of

the organizers of the Feb. 3 rally. Most of the people at that rally, he said, wouldn't have been able to attend if it had been held during normal business hours.

Lobby Night is a tradition as old as most people can remember, but it has changed radically in just the past few years.

There was a time, not so long ago and before a series of new laws sharply limited the gifts lawmakers can receive, when Lobby Night really belonged to the professionals.

That's not to say legislators didn't meet with constituents before the 8 p.m. session. But the real action happened afterward, when professional lobbyists would grab lawmakers and go off to expense-account dinners.

"Harry Brown's was so crowded you could hardly walk through," House Minority Leader Robert Kittleman, Howard County Republican, recalled of



the Annapolis landmark restaurant.

He said ethics reform ended the dominance of the professionals on Monday nights, the deep-pocketed lobbyists known as "sponsors."

"I haven't heard the word sponsor used in three, four years," Mr. Kittleman said. There is a whole generation of younger lawmakers "who probably don't even know what that means."

These days, Monday nights are securely in the hands of the amateurs.

Last week, supporters of a free-tuition plan put forward by Gov. Parris Glendening brought high school and college students to the State House for Lobby Night. The governor himself took advantage of the rally to speak on behalf of his embattled Hope Scholarships proposal.

At the same time, the Maryland chapter of Common Cause brought members from all over the state to press legislators on campaign finance reform. Legislation has passed the House but remains under consideration by the Senate.

Tonight, the American Lung Association will use Lobby Night to push the General Assembly on a variety of anti-tobacco measures, including cigarette tax increases and a ban on vending machine sales. The group plans to surround the State House with a chain of smoking opponents in an event they are billing as a "breaking the chain of tobacco addition" rally.

By Sean Scully
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

ANNAPOLIS — State legislators speak a language all their own, sometimes inscrutable to all except themselves. Some people wonder how intelligible it is to the legislators themselves.

Herewith, some words and definitions for foreign travelers in Legislative Land:

- Without objection: Committee chairmen, the House speaker and Senate president use these words to indicate a unanimous agreement by the assembled legislators. In practice, this means "the chairman likes it this way and nobody better get up to whine about it now."

- Sponsor (meaning #1): The delegate or senator who crafted a bill or who signed on as a sup-

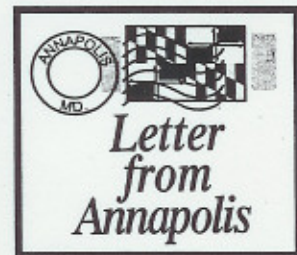
A primer on lawmakers' jargon

porter when it was introduced.

- Sponsor (meaning #2): A lobbyist who picks up the tab for dinner or drinks. This word has fallen out of regular use in this era of ethics reports and gift limits, but it still occasionally pops up.

- First reader: The way a bill reads when it is first introduced. This often bears no resemblance to what the bill will look like when a committee is finished chopping it up.

- Second reader: The way a bill reads when the committee is finished chopping it up. This often bears no resemblance to what the bill will look like when the full House or Senate is fin-



ished chopping it up.

- Third reader: The way a bill reads when the full House or Senate is finished chopping it up and is ready to take a final vote on it.

- Unfavorable report: A term committees use to explain that they hated a bill and killed it.

- FWA: Favorable with amendments, a term committees use, while bringing a bill to the floor, to acknowledge that they chopped it up first. Amendments are sometimes purely technical — correcting misprints or adding sponsors — but sometimes they completely change the meaning of the law.

- Yield: Asked of a legislator who is speaking on a bill — usually the bill's sponsor or the chairman of the committee that approved it — by another lawmaker who wants to ask a question or, more likely, make a rhe-

torical point about the bill. "Will the sponsor yield?" is never met with a "No." But some veteran committee chairmen have been known to get annoyed and simply sit down — to stop yielding, as it were — effectively cutting off debate.

- The distinguished gentleman (or lady): What delegates and senators must call one another during regular sessions. Normally, legislators may not call one another by name during sessions without permission of the presiding officer. While "distinguished" is intended as a sign of respect between lawmakers, it can be said in such a way as to make it clear that the "distinguished gentleman" is a nitwit.

- Sine die: "Without another day." The long-awaited last day of the session.