

GOP hosts a House party to irk Dems

ae T-shirted tourists and crying kids fill the chamber during a recess pep rally for energy legislation.

By Joseph Morton

□ *WORLD-HERALD BUREAU*

WASHINGTON -- Tailored suits and polished shoes represent the customary dress code for lawmakers on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives.

In the past week, however, the chamber's plush leather seats have been occupied by tourists more likely to sport T-shirts, shorts and flip-flops.

Since the House officially adjourned Aug. 1, small groups of Republican members have held a "shadow session" to demand that Democrats return and vote on energy legislation that allows for more domestic oil drilling. Members have invited onto the floor their own aides and groups of vacationing tourists.

The faux sessions are expected to continue through the end of the month and possibly until the second week of September, when Congress reconvenes.

They start with a prayer and the Pledge of Allegiance and close with the singing of "God Bless America."

The time in between has featured some unusual scenes for the House floor -- to say the least:

ae Children sitting crosslegged in the grown-ups' seats.

ae Parents pacing to soothe upset babies.

ae A woman so cold in the heavily air-conditioned chamber that she drapes a newspaper over herself.

Rep. Lee Terry, R-Neb., called the atmosphere "surreal." The Omaha congressman flew back to Washington for one day on Thursday to help keep the sessions going. He said the action represents a "historic uprising."

Jim Esch -- Terry's challenger in the November election -- and other Democrats have another way to describe the sessions: "partisan stunt."

The Esch campaign has called on Terry to "get back to work" and seek bipartisan solutions to the energy crisis.

Terry wasn't changing course: He planned to return to participate in a session on Tuesday.

This all started when the House adjourned for its customary monthlong August break. A number of Republican members had hoped to deliver speeches arguing for more oil drilling to bring down gas prices. Instead, the Democrats shut everything down, turning off the cameras, the microphones, the lights. Frustrated Republicans simply kept talking. Normal House rules didn't apply. The members started bringing tourists and staff onto the floor. Things grew raucous on occasion, with people chanting, giving standing ovations or

booing at the mention of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif.

Republican leaders liked what they saw and called on more members to return last week to keep the sessions going.

Democratic leaders say proposals to expand domestic drilling would not increase fuel supplies for a decade. They have criticized the Republicans as acting in the oil companies' interests.

At this point, most of the chambers' lights are on, but microphones and cameras remain off.

With no time limits on speeches, no Democrats to speak in opposition and the occasional audience participation, the "sessions" often seem more like pep rallies. Add to that atmosphere the members' penchant for using props in their floor speeches.

Rep. Pete Sessions of Texas waved a bicycle tire pump and called it the Democratic Party's energy platform. He was mocking presumed Democratic presidential nominee Barack Obama's suggestion that drivers can conserve energy by keeping their tires properly inflated, though that is also the recommendation of environmental experts and even the Republican governors of California and Florida.

Terry employed various visual aids, including a blowup of a World-Herald editorial cartoon lampooning windbag politicians. He joked that the country could use the "hot air" coming from Democratic leaders in place of heating oil.

"That would probably make us energy-independent right there," Terry said.

It's valid, he said, to question whether the sessions undermine the decorum of the House, but he said the participation of everyday people is symbolic.

"It represents what we're trying to do, which is get the people involved, because it is a grassroots effort," Terry said.

Esch campaign spokesman Joe Sibilio said the energy crisis results from Congress being unable to find bipartisan solutions. He criticized Terry for playing "make-believe Congress."

"Our country is in desperate need of solutions, and Lee Terry's partisan stunt does nothing to help the people of Nebraska," Sibilio said.

Rep. Steve King, R-Iowa, has spoken several times during the sessions. Nebraska Reps. Adrian Smith and Jeff Fortenberry, both Republicans, participated on the first day.

