

(01-05) 04:00 PST Washington - Newly elected House Speaker Nancy Pelosi racked up her first legislative victory of the 110th Congress on Thursday, passing ethics reforms that will ban gifts and meals paid for by lobbyists and strictly limit travel for lawmakers funded by outside groups.

Pelosi, in an opening day speech, called the measures the "toughest congressional ethics reform in history." Government watchdog groups agreed the new rules amount to the biggest crackdown on the influence of lobbyists since the post-Watergate changes in ethics rules, but added that Democrats still must improve the enforcement of ethics rules.

The measures were part of Pelosi's pledge to run "the most ethical Congress in history" and were passed on the opening day of the House session -- usually strictly a ceremonial day -- to signal a break from the GOP-led 109th Congress, which was plagued by numerous corruption and influence-peddling scandals.

Republicans cried foul at Pelosi's decision to go straight to the floor with the ethics package as part of the House rules without taking the measures through committee or soliciting input from the minority party. Rep. Lee Terry, R-Neb., called the move "a slap in the face" of House Republicans.

But Pelosi's move put GOP members in a tight spot: If they opposed the rules, they would appear to be sanctioning corruption in Congress. Republicans complained bitterly about the process and most voted against a measure setting the rules of the debate. But in the end, they joined Democrats in approving the rules changes almost unanimously.

The new rules will force members of Congress to pay the full fare when they fly on corporate jets, ending the practice of offering lawmakers deeply discounted airfare -- a perk that often gave corporations special access to lawmakers.

The rules also outlawed the so-called K Street Project, a Republican campaign led by former Majority Leader Tom DeLay of Texas to pressure lobbying firms to hire former members and top staffers of their own party. A key goal of the project, named for the street that houses the offices of the powerful capital lobbying firms, was to boost lobbyists' campaign donations to GOP candidates.

Democrats, in a symbolic move, allowed many of the ethics rules to be highlighted by freshman lawmakers who won election in November by ousting Republicans mired in scandal.

Rep. Zack Space, D-Ohio, won the seat vacated by former Republican Rep. Bob Ney after Ney pleaded guilty to corruption charges in the probe of lobbyist Jack Abramoff. Space was asked by Democratic leaders to offer the ban on travel for lawmakers that is organized or paid for by lobbyists.

"The influence of lobbyists has compromised the reputation and even the health of this body," Space said. "In order to restore the integrity of this chamber and restore 's faith in its elected officials, we must undertake substantial ethics reforms."

Rep. Jerry McNerney, D-Pleasanton, who beat powerful House Resources Committee Chairman Richard Pombo, in part by saying the Tracy Republican was in the pocket of the oil and gas industry, gave his first floor

speech Thursday, calling for new rules to "improve the strained relationship that exists between voters and elected officials."

"In traveling throughout California, I heard from people who simply wanted to believe their representative again," McNerney said. "Today we're sending the message that we feel the same way."

The new rules offer some exceptions to allow lawmakers to accept one-day, one-night trips to participate in a forum or give a speech. But all such trips must be approved in advance by the House Ethics Committee to weed out any golfing junkets. The travel restrictions will go into effect March 1.

Common Cause President Chellie Pingree praised Pelosi for pushing through "bold and meaningful new rules" to rein in the influence of lobbyists. But she also called on Pelosi to add an independent ethics board to force the House to enforce the rules.

Pelosi and Republican leader John Boehner have said they will ask a bipartisan group to report to them by March about potential changes in ethics rules including the creation of an independent board.

