

WORLD-HERALD BUREAU

WASHINGTON - Punching a time clock five days a week may not seem like a big deal to most folks , but it will represent a big change for Congress. For much of 2006 , the Republican-controlled House started work in Washington on Tuesday afternoons and adjourned on Thursdays.

But incoming Democratic leaders are eager to burst out of the gate with an ambitious agenda. They said this week that they plan to institute a work schedule that starts on Monday evening and ends on Friday afternoon when the new Congress begins in January.

Many congressional members , who make \$165 ,200 a year , have a habit of heading home on Thursdays and returning to Washington on Tuesdays.

Of course , that's true only during the relatively few weeks that Congress is in session. Members have the benefit of numerous recesses , including one that spans the month of August.

By the time the final gavel falls on the 109th Congress today , members will have worked a total of 103 days - seven fewer days than the infamous "Do-Nothing Congress" of 1948.

But Nebraska lawmakers disputed any suggestion that they've been taking it

easy and said people have the wrong idea about how the job works.

Time at home in their districts is spent meeting with constituents , visiting local businesses and handling other official matters.

"It's not that we're sitting on a beach on Monday ," said Rep. Lee Terry , R-Neb.

Terry estimated that his average workday in Omaha is about eight to nine hours , while the average workday in Washington is about 14 hours. That doesn't count travel time or situations where he'll talk with a constituent outside of work hours.

Still , Terry said , he's fine with the more aggressive congressional schedule as long as the Democrats have substantive issues to debate. He said it will be frustrating if the members are simply renaming post offices.

Terry also said the new schedule probably won't last forever - especially when House members must wait for the Senate to act on bills the House has approved.

Rep. Jeff Fortenberry , R-Neb. , said Republican leaders have emphasized working at home , while Democrats are emphasizing working in Washington .

Fortenberry said he will withhold judgment on whether the new schedule is a good idea. But he is not convinced that logging more hours on Capitol Hill automatically translates into additional productivity.

"Sometimes work expands to fill the time available ," Fortenberry said.

Rep. Steve King , R-Iowa , said he doesn't know a member of Congress who fails to work 70 to 80 hours a week. But he said he'd happily work 100 hours a week "to protect our borders and win the war."

Rep. Tom Osborne , R-Neb. , is retiring and won't have to deal with the change.

He has taken issue with the perception that members of Congress don't work hard. He said constituents in a rural area such as Nebraska 's sprawling 3rd Congressional District expect to see their congressman in person , and it takes time to get around the 69 counties in the district.

He estimated that he logged 200 ,000 miles a year traveling through the state , back and forth to Washington and on overseas trips.

Osborne added that the willingness to work together in Congress is more important than working longer hours.

"You could do huge things in a one-day workweek if everybody decided to cooperate for the common good ," he said.

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