

DEMS NEXT STOP LOBBYISTS FUNNEL MONEY TOWARD NEW ISSUES

By PAUL THARP

January 5, 2007 -- Despite a reform makeover in Congress, the lobbying money train that's financed by corporate America is likely to keep making its stops in Washington's power structure, albeit at entirely different stations.

The influence pros who've helped shape much of Capitol Hill's legislation in recent years say they'll still be on the job now that the Democrats have assumed control of both houses - though the efforts will focus on different issues.

"The old horses who once led the pack aren't in the race anymore," said Marty Russo, a former Democratic congressman who's now CEO of Cassidy & Associates, a major lobbying firm, referring to last year's Congress.

Among the issues being targeted by corporate America: renewable energy, health care, protecting the middle class and the environment - all issues that experts say fell on deaf ears in Washington before November's electoral rout.

Among new big spenders are labor groups trying to make it easier to set up unions in companies, and environmental companies with new ideas and solutions.

Politicians are already rolling out the welcome mat for many of them.

The Senate's powerful Environmental and Public Works Committee, newly chaired by Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.), has already renamed two of its important committees by adding the phrase "global warming" to the formal names of the panels.

"There's a substantial sea change in the agenda everywhere," Russo said.

The hottest issue that's generating the biggest new cash flows into political coffers is global warming.

"All the billions in incentives enjoyed by the oil and gas industries will probably be shifted very soon to renewable energy," Russo said, citing wind, geothermal, solar and other sources.

Yet before any new energy proposals begin to surface in the new Congress, oil companies are writing bigger checks to their lobbyists - and likewise among renewal energy advocates.

"The business lobby is pouring in a lot of money just to frame the debate before it starts," said Alexander Bolton, senior writer at The Hill, a publication covering the daily business of lawmakers.

Bolton said that even in the first days of the new Congress major cash is flowing into the fight over whether the government can set drug prices instead of pharmaceutical companies.

"The pharmaceutical industry has traditionally been the biggest lobby in Washington and stands to lose hundreds of millions over this," Bolton said.

"But the lobby for retired people is also spending a lot of money right off the bat to make sure they can win this," added Bolton.