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First woman speaker of the House may aim to revisit potty-parity issue

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MCCLATCHY-TRIBUNE

WASHINGTON — When nature calls during a debate or vote in the House of Representatives, what's a member of Congress to do?

The answer, even as the first female speaker of the House prepares to be sworn in next month, depends on gender.

The members-only House men's room, with its shoeshine stand, fireplace and television tuned to floor proceedings, is nestled a few paces from the House chamber, beside the speaker's lounge, flanked by Capitol police. How convenient.

Reaching the women's equivalent is more challenging. It entails traversing a hall where tourists gather, or entering the minority leader's office, navigating a corridor that winds past secretarial desks and punching in a keypad code to ensure restricted access. Not so convenient.

So when speaker-designate Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., takes the gavel, she may revisit, along with the Iraq war and raising the minimum wage, the question of potty parity.

Starting in January, the 435-member House will have a record 71 women. (The 100-member Senate will have 16 women, also a record.)

Asked whether female House members should also get a loo off the chamber, Pelosi said, "I'm all for it — let's find a spot." Mischievously, she said she's eyeing the men's room just steps from the chamber, "but the gentlemen, they just won't get out of there."

Lingering sensitivities

There are arguably more pressing matters for Congress when it returns to a pivotal wartime session and Democratic control for the first time in a dozen years.

"We've got a lot of other problems ahead of this, starting with the minimum wage, health care, education," said Rep. Carolyn Maloney, D-N.Y.

But the very mention of restroom access is a reminder of the institution's male-dominated legacy, and it stirs lingering sensitivities.

At least one incoming female freshman representative may take up the cause. Rep.-elect Yvette Clarke, a Democratic New York City councilwoman, was lead sponsor of that city's Women's Restroom Equity Bill, signed into law in 2005. It requires a 2-to-1 ratio for women's bathrooms to men's in new construction and major building renovations.

Clarke said she wouldn't try to impose such mandates on historic structures like the Capitol. But she thinks women should have at least one toilet off the House chamber, rather than having to run down the hall. "When we're talking about restroom equity, we're talking about the time it takes each of us to handle our business and get back to

business."

Even so, several female House members said they can live with the longer walk — particularly because the restroom suite, where the congressional women's caucus began meeting in 1977, is posh: It has a fireplace, chandelier, lounge and meeting room with early American furniture.

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