

Tightening Up House Operations

When Scot Faulkner took over as the top administrator of the House this year, he could not find complete records of how many people were involved in running the House or what they did. Financial record-keeping in many members' offices was done on ledgers that had been designed in the Continental Congress. And the only information about how much members of the House spent on their office supplies and salaries was in the dense quarterly report of the Clerk of the House.

"We've had so much informality that, on a given day, there was no way to know what was going out the door" in terms of money, Faulkner said in an interview this week.

All of that has changed in the last 10 months, since Republicans took over the running of the House and hired Faulkner, the former head of a business management and training consulting firm, as its Chief Administrative Officer.

He is trying to make the House's operation more businesslike, from record-keeping to the first formal training program for staffers. "Everything we do as CAO has a private-sector counterpart," he said.

The House had been doing inventory manually. Faulkner's office bought supermarket-style bar code readers to do inventory electronically.

Landlords who rent office space to members in their districts had grown accustomed to calling the House to renew their leases verbally. Faulkner now requires a written agreement.

Although few on the Hill quarrel with Faulkner's approach, not everyone agrees that he has worked wonders. Democrat Vic Fazio, Calif., said the situation was not quite so bleak as Republicans and Faulkner paint it. "We've constantly improved" House operations, he said. The Republican claim of "40 years of neglect is just an outrage."

Faulkner has concentrated especially on improving the financial information going to members. Starting next month, members will get monthly statements telling them how much they've spent that month and year-to-date and projecting whether they will stay in budget for the rest of the year.

Members may not like some of the items on their new bills: From now on, their office accounts will be billed when they use the House photography and recording studios, instead of the House as a whole paying for the services. And members will have to find a private business to print and fold their letters, something previously done by House employees.

Faulkner has also been contracting out for services previously provided by House employees. For example, the House barber shop is now run as a private business.

The biggest move toward such privatization will come in the next few months, as the House considers whether to privatize its mail delivery and pickup. Faulkner said his office will be submitting to the House Oversight Committee a list of three companies that can provide mail service at a savings of \$1 million annually.

Privatization of the postal operations is not necessarily a sure thing, according to House Oversight Committee Chairman Bill Thomas, R-Calif. He said members have security concerns about a private company handling their mail that need to be addressed.

Faulkner now knows how many people work for him and the other officers of the House. And as efforts to modernize and privatize the House continue, that number shrinks. He started off with 1,063 employees and is now at 710. If the postal operations are contracted out, that number will drop to about 600.

- Elizabeth A. Palmer