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THE DEMOCRATIC NATIONAL CONVENTION

Corporate Money Becomes the Life of the Parties

Hundreds of social events, most funded by businesses and lobbyists, lure convention-goers.

By Lisa Getter
Times Staff Writer

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BOSTON — Adrienne Levey was showing members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute a smelly concrete alley next to a trendy nightclub where in less than 24 hours they would be hosting one of the Democratic National Convention's hottest parties. This, she told them, would be the VIP entrance.

"You don't want to see how a sausage is made. You just see the sausage," she said as they looked at her with disbelief.

And when the VIPs — mostly members of Congress and their guests — arrived at the party late Monday night, the alley indeed had been transformed: with a red carpet, lights and a Mylar screen. Lots of scrubbing had taken away the stench.

Hundreds of such parties are taking place all over town this week — for delegates, lawmakers, top donors and other convention-goers. And nearly all are being financed with millions of dollars in corporate money.

Changes in campaign finance law eliminated big corporate donations to federal political committees, but nothing prohibits a corporation, trade group or lobbying firm from paying for a party. Most are tributes to members of Congress, usually those who have influence over the corporate interests paying for the bash.

Each day of the convention, there are breakfasts, brunches, lunches, cocktail parties and dinners, featuring top-of-the-line food, liquor and wine. Many of the parties occur at the same time as the convention itself, although that hasn't seemed to cut down on attendance.

"For many people, the hall is the least attractive place to be," said Dennis Fitzgibbons, DaimlerChrysler's director of public policy.

For those who do attend the convention proceedings, there are parties that begin at 10 p.m. and end at 2 a.m.

Behind every bash is a planner like Levey, whose three-person shop in Los Angeles put on 21 events at the 2000 Democratic convention. This year, Spellbound Creative Concepts planned nine private parties and, after expenses, will earn about \$100,000 from all of them.

With a background in Washington politics, fundraising and event planning, Levey, 46, is an unflappable organizer. "You need the energy of someone young and the calm of someone with a little more maturity," she said.

A cellphone at her ear, Levey remained calm as the frantic preparations went on around her. One of the members of Los Lobos, the band that would perform at the Hispanic Caucus party, had a headache. No problem. Levey dashed off to get him Tylenol gel caps.

The fire marshal said the ugly lights by the scaffolding that lined the building could not be removed. No problem. Her designer would improvise.

A U.S. Capitol Police officer, at a security briefing hours before the party began, told the party staff that if something really serious were to happen, "just hit the floor" and he would take control of the situation. Levey had hired private security as well, and the nightclub, Felt, had its own bouncers.

As with most events here, the tab would be expensive — between \$150,000 and \$200,000.

A security guard for actor Ben Affleck arrived as the party was in full swing. He scoped out the VIP area, which created a buzz among the party planners. But Affleck never showed.

Even so, the party went off without a hitch.

Los Lobos performed two 45-minute sets, ignoring songs from their new CD and instead focusing on crowd favorites like "Guantanamera," "Papa Was a Rolling Stone" and "La Bamba."

Saxophone player and keyboardist Steve Berlin, who had a Kerry sticker on his keyboard, said he was a big supporter of the Democratic Party. The group also had performed at the 2000 convention.

Berlin asked who was paying for the party and was seemingly relieved to learn it was the American Gas Assn. "That's natural gas, right?" he said. "Those are the good guys."

Several corporations chipped in as well, including tobacco firm Altria Group, phone company BellSouth, mortgage giants Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, and pharmaceuticals firm Pfizer.

The gas association also sponsored a reception Monday for Sen. Max Baucus of Montana and the state's delegation at a Beacon Hill townhouse. Three actors, portraying John and Abigail Adams and Paul Revere, entertained guests as they ate.

Baucus, the ranking minority member of the Senate Finance Committee, helped write an energy tax incentive bill endorsed by the gas trade group. Originally part of the stalled energy legislation, the tax breaks are now part of a jobs bill that has a greater chance of winning approval.

Critics of the corporate parties view them as ways to curry favor and gain influence with members of Congress.

But Baucus, who is also being honored by other business groups here, says natural gas is important to Montana. "I pride myself on doing what is right," he said. "I like to think that by far most people who support me do so because they know that I'm not in anyone's pocket."

Some people say that the parties are not all about fun.

Robin Bronk, executive director of the Creative Coalition, a nonprofit group that advocates 1st Amendment rights and government funding for the arts, said the group used parties at the convention to get its message across to legislators. Its gala planned for tonight, featuring the Red Hot Chili Peppers and a slew of celebrities, was one of the hottest tickets in town.

At a recent forum in Washington, Don Fowler, a former chairman of the Democratic National Committee, said there simply wasn't much else to do at conventions but go to parties.

"It's a tremendous boon to special interests," he said. "Some of the best lobbying in the world is done at these conventions."

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