

For Some Members, K Street Is Dead End

By CHRIS FRATES

The assumption that any member of Congress can successfully trade the crushing demands of public life for the money-lined confines of K Street is one of Washington's most enduring story lines.

It's also a myth. Most lawmakers who've made the switch aren't

able to make it seriously rain once they walk through the revolving door. And many find that the transition can be much tougher than they imagined.

Former lawmakers, used to giving orders, find themselves answering to clients on K Street. Where they once took meetings, they now must ask nicely for them. And they have to hone a new skill: hustling for business.

"Members have a battery of staff to help manage all that ass-kissing, and they go downtown and they're on their own," said John Michael Gonzalez, a former congressional-aide-turned-lobbyist.

Another lobbyist recalled that one member with key committee assignments lured by his firm also insisted his former chief of staff come aboard. The firm reluctantly made the deal. And a year later, the former member had left, while his former top aide had become a rock star.

"Former members tend to be show horses. They're members of Congress. They don't tend to work that hard — and lobbying, despite the glamorous reputation ... requires really long hours and really hard work," the lobbyist said.

Some lawmakers may imagine a lobbyist lifestyle full of jet-setting, power lunching and golf outings. But, in reality, it's endless conference calls, client meetings and bag lunches in the office kitchenette.

The end result often means that "former staffers make for better lobbyists than former members," the lobbyist said.

One of the top assets some members pitch when moving to K Street is their ability to use their relationships with former colleagues to set up meetings with their firms' lobbyists.

But their old congressional colleagues are wise to that one. Gonzalez, who was chief of staff to Rep. Melissa L. Bean (D-Ill.), said he started denying those requests for sit-downs with the congresswoman when the former members didn't show up, sending underlings instead.

Some members may show some early prowess on K Street, but the grinding schedule can take its toll.

Take former Sen. Bob Packwood (R-Ore.), for instance. The Senate Finance Committee chairman resigned from the Senate in 1995 after the Ethics Committee recommended expelling him for making aggressive sexual advances on almost two dozen women.

He seemed to land on his feet initially, starting his own firm and bringing in about \$1.5 million in 1999. Last year, his firm reported just \$200,000 in income, according to the Center for Responsive Politics, a nonpartisan watchdog of political money.

Packwood did not respond to requests for comment.

Then there's former Rep. Bill Lowery (R-Calif.).

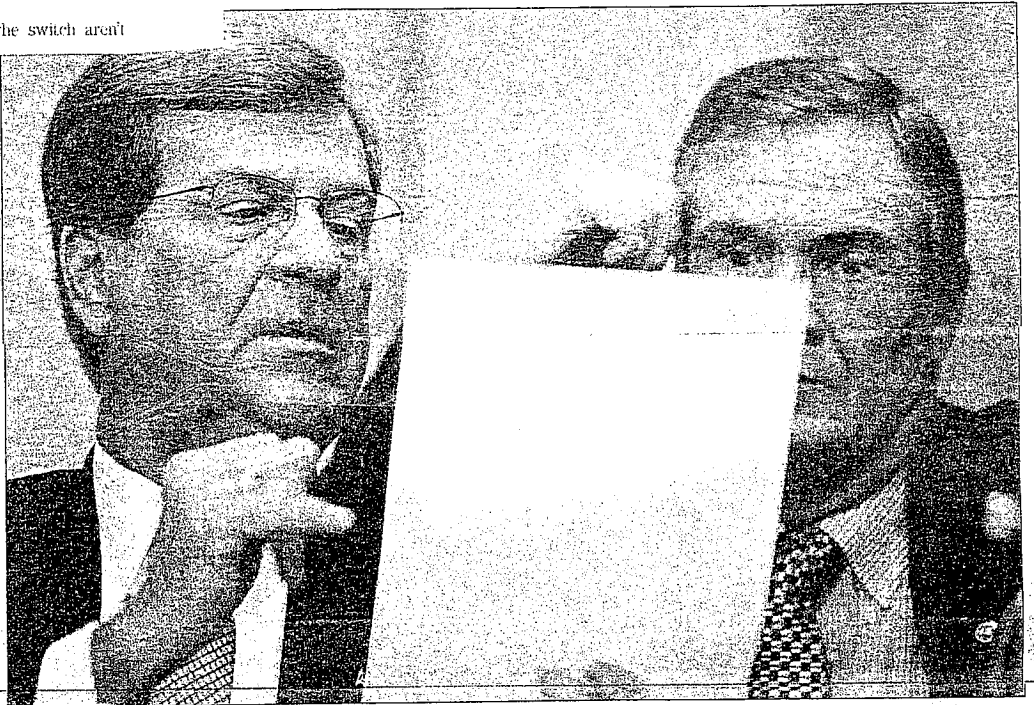
He's seen his firm's earnings halved since the Justice Department began investigating his ties to Rep. Jerry Lewis (R-Calif.), who's been caught up in an ongoing federal bribery investigation.

In 2005, Copeland, Lowery & Jacquez brought in almost \$7.5 million. After the investigation surfaced in 2006, the bipartisan firm split up and Lowery and several of the firm's other Republicans formed Innovative Federal Strategies, which brought in \$3.8 million last year.

A Republican lobbyist who knows Lowery said he was mostly interested in making a quick buck. "People who think about this as a get-rich-quick scheme as opposed to building a business are going to get in trouble," the lobbyist said.

Lowery, who has denied any wrongdoing, did not return a request for comment.

Of course, there are former members who



Former Sen. Bob Packwood (below) started his own firm after leaving office. Former Sens. Trent Lott and John Breau (above) formed the Breau-Lott Leadership Group, which pulled down nearly \$8 million in their first year as rainmaker lobbyists.



Former Rep. Vic Fazio retired in 1997 and joined Clark & Weinstock.

haven't boomed or busted but are surviving nicely in something of a K Street middle class.

Former Rep. J.C. Watts (R-Okla.) and his firm pulled down a respectable \$2.1 million in 2008, outperforming former House Majority Leader Dick Gephardt (D-Mo.), whose shop brought home \$1.5 million in lobbying fees.

That's not to say, though, there aren't any superstars.

Former Rep. Vin Weber (R-Minn.) started the Washington office of the New York communications firm Clark & Weinstock in 1994. And it grew into one of the top lobbying shops, bringing in almost \$80 million over the past decade, according to the center.

"Whether you're a member of Congress or a high-ranking staff member, wherever you are in life, you don't want to spend the rest of your life as a former something. And to avoid that ... you have to build a new career in a new profession," Weber said.

When Rep. Vic Fazio (D-Calif.) retired in

1997, he joined Weber at Clark & Weinstock, further expanding the firm's influence.

Very often, Fazio said, lawmakers don't deal much with lobbyists and interest groups from outside their districts or states. Members tend to see K Street as a fundraising destination instead of an educational opportunity.

If members are interested in someday making the trip across town, Fazio suggested they work more closely with Washington's influence class.

"If you want to be respected in the world of Washington outside the Capitol, you need to make yourself open to that, and you learn a lot," said Fazio, who moved in 2005 to the lobbying law firm Akin Gump.

Some other lawmakers-turned-rainmakers include former Sens. John Breau (D-La.) and Trent Lott (R-Miss.), who founded the Breau-Lott Leadership Group, which pulled down almost \$8 million in its first year.

Louisiana Republican Bob Livingston, who

was heir apparent to then-House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) before abruptly resigning after acknowledging several extramarital affairs, has rehabilitated his image on K Street, and his firm made a tidy \$9 million last year.

And the Nickles Group, founded by former Sen. Don Nickles (R-Okla.), pulled in \$7.7 million last year.

The most common advice lawmakers-turned-lobbyists have for their former colleagues is: Be prepared to work.

"When you're starting your own business, you have to work your butt off," said Nickles, who took out a home equity loan to launch a lobbying shop that had no clients when it opened its doors.

Still, it's not all work and no play on K Street.

"The No. 1 positive that exists," Weber said, "is something that most members forget existed: the weekend.