

# The Regional Reporter

www.rra.org

NOVEMBER- DECEMBER 2002

By JERRY ZREMSKI  
Buffalo News

## U.S.-Iraq conflict

The story a U.S. war with Iraq will be thousands of miles away in the Persian Gulf, but we regionals here in Washington will have to cover it.

And we can. All it takes is a little imagination and a little hard work to come up with stories that matter to your readers.

If the Bush administration decides to invade Iraq sometime over the winter, there will be stories to be found about the war itself, and about the politics behind it.

Of course, it's best of all to cover the war in person if you can, which is why some regionals are already making plans to do just

that.

Ed Felker of Small Newspapers has already been in touch with the Army command that he covers, which has had a presence in the Persian Gulf since the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

He wants to travel to Kuwait to hook up with the troops relatively soon, but has discovered that he has to jump through some hoops to do so. He'll have to make it to Kuwait City on his own, rather than using a military transport, and that will cost about \$1,300.

He'll need pre-approval from the public affairs office of the Army unit he covers, along with approval from U.S. Central Command.

See [IRAQ](#) on Page 6

# COVERING THERE

# FROM HERE



**Lawmaker's low-airfares, 3, and ...**  
**... one regional's take on it, 4**

**INSIDE**  
Click to read stories

**"Pen-and-pad" briefings, 5**  
**President's report, 2**

**Web link, 3** ■ **Restive regions, 4** ■ **Meeting minutes, 8**

## PRESIDENT'S REPORT

By MARC HELLER ■ Watertown Daily Times

# Some formula grants don't compute

All of us write about federal grants from time to time. But have you ever thought about how the government decides how much to dole out? Welcome to the world of the formula grant.

Government is full of them – grants for new housing, schools, streets and sewers. But are the formulas fair? That was the question I recently decided to ask about a program that affects most regional reporters but that most of us just list in stories about federal dollars headed home: Impact aid. This was my summer project, part of the annual trip I make to Watertown during that region's brief period of poor skiing.

Impact is one of the earliest, if not the earliest, federal direct assistance programs for school districts. It compensates schools for the property taxes they can't collect on Indian reservations, military installations and other federal property. Kids from those places typically go to public school, so the districts get a double hit: they accept more students but can't generate enough tax revenue to cover the costs.

But the compensation varies widely from district to district for reasons that don't have much to do with educating kids – and in ways that made me scratch my head.

For example: In Northern New York, we have a school district called Indian River that received \$9.2 million in impact aid and had 1,787 students connected with Fort Drum, an Army base. By comparison, the Norfolk City School Board in Virginia, with 5,600

military students, saw \$3 million less.

Even within our region, we saw inequities among districts. A school district next to Indian River, called Carthage, had 643 military students and got less than half as much per student.

What's going on? This is what happens when the government tries to be fair.

As all of us know, there's a difference between authorizations and appropriations. And it's been years since Congress gave impact aid its full authorization. So Congress loaded another formula on top of this formula program and dubbed that section of the law "in the event of insufficient appropriations."

We found that if the program were fully funded, Norfolk would get more than Indian River. But because of the formula on top of the formula, their positions were reversed. How could both situations be fair?

The program is already complicated enough. Students are assigned different weights for the formula, depending whether they live on military bases (a weight of 1.0), are off-post military (a weight of .20) or live on Indian trust lands (a weight of 1.25). The extra calculations are so twisted, many school officials told me they don't understand them.

Hundreds of school districts across the country are affected by this. Those most likely to be shortchanged are districts where federally-connected kids are less than half the student population and where impact aid is only a small piece of the budget,

which the government figures are good ways to measure a district's need.

The problem is, some districts get full funding and others don't. So the government's not quite keeping its promise of making schools whole. And while impact aid helps school districts like Indian River afford more teachers and guidance counselors and remedial reading, districts like Carthage have to make up the shortfall – \$1.3 million in this case -- by raising taxes or getting rid of teachers, both of which happened there this year.

Impact aid has become such an industry that there's an interest group in town devoted entirely to this one program – the National Association of Federally Impacted Schools. The organization meets twice a year and publishes a weekly newsletter. Every year, NAFIS tries in vain to get the program fully funded, which would even things out a bit.

If you're interested in seeing how this affects your school districts at home, call NAFIS at (202) 624-5455, and visit their website at

[www.sso.org/nafis](http://www.sso.org/nafis).

The Regional Reporter is published monthly by the Regional Reporters Association for its members. Please direct mail to:

Regional Reporters Association  
Ben Franklin Station  
P.O. Box 254  
Washington, DC 20054-0254

Direct newsletter inquiries to newsletter editor Lisa Friedman at [lisafriedman@angnewspapers.net](mailto:lisafriedman@angnewspapers.net) or layout editor Jim Sergent at [jjsargent@earthlink.net](mailto:jjsargent@earthlink.net).

Find us on the Web: [www.ra.org](http://www.ra.org).



## WEB LINK

Web site picks of the month  
Click link to visit site

<http://www.sexcriminals.com/>

The Supreme Court is considering a case on public sex offender registries Nov. 13 (Conn. Dept. of Public Safety v. John Doe). You can fund hundreds of state/local Web sex offender registries here, and other info.

<http://1stam.umn.edu/>

Check on 1st Amendment developments, including upcoming Supreme Court cases.

<http://www.wordspy.com/index.asp>

Improve your vocabulary and befuddle your editors.

<http://www.clerkweb.house.gov/elections/elections.htm>

Election stats since 1920.

<http://www.citizen.org/congress/forms/527search.cfm>

Search 527 groups.

— Compiled by Jeff Miller,  
Allentown Morning Call

## Lawmaker's low airfares

# GSA, airlines help land story on feds' flying perk

By BILL HILLBURG  
Los Angeles News Group

Who gets to fly from Dulles to LAX for \$90 each way with no blackout periods, no advanced reservations required and no penalties for changed itineraries?

House members and Senators, the same folks who set down the rules governing flying by the great unwashed back in coach.

There are no more frequent flyers than California lawmakers, many of whom make the bicoastal round trip every weekend. With a little bit of digging and a bit of shaming, I found that they and their colleagues enjoy the same flying privileges as millions of other federal workers on official business.

The General Services Administration was only too happy to gush to me about the program, which they claim has cut its overall travel costs. So were members, who cited the savings for taxpayers while denying that their pampered status left them with no clue as to the fares and issues faced by their flying constituents.

The major airlines were also agog, elated that lawmakers and feds were filling up many seats that would otherwise go empty. By the way, the feds' special flying status was imbedded in the same late 1970s legislation that deregulated the airline industry and doomed longstanding service to many medium- and small-sized markets.

The term "official travel" is loosely applied, with many a trek for a district work period or a weekend trip mixing approved business with campaigning and fund raising. The cheap tickets come out of taxpayer-funded representational budgets, which now run more than \$900,000 per seat, per year, in the

House and into the millions in the Senate.

Rep. Brad Sherman, D-Calif., recently defended members' disclosure statements, noting that it was important to voters to know what economic class their representatives are

in when they vote on tax reform and other pocketbook issues.

The same goes for largely undisclosed lawmakers' official travel. But it should be stressed that almost all members ride in economy to avoid icy stares from voters slogging their way through jetliner heaven on their way back to the cheap seats.

If you do spot a solon in first or business class, he or she most likely cashed in their frequent flyer miles to upgrade their federal coach tickets. Unlike most business travelers, House members and Senators get to keep the fly miles they've racked up on the taxpayers' dime for personal use, including family vacations.

And did I mention that lawmakers park for free and close up at Dulles or National?

## The cheap tickets come out of taxpayer-funded representational budgets

■ To read Bill Hillburg's story click here or go to [Page 4](#)



## RESTIVE REGIONS

**Todd Gillman** starts at the Dallas Morning News Washington office Jan. 1. A political reporter at the Texas paper for 13 years, he'll cover the Texas congressional delegation and other news. Gillman replaces Christopher Lee, who went to the Washington Post.

**Alex Fryer**, a reporter from the Seattle Times, is moving to the paper's Washington office. He replaces Kevin Galvin, who left to become deputy national editor at the Boston Globe.

MediaNews Group has added two reporters to its Washington bureau. **Chris Smith** came from the Salt Lake (Utah) Tribune and will continue to write for that paper. Ian Bishop came from the Lowell (Mass.) Sun and will be writing for the Sun and five other MediaNews papers in Massachusetts and Vermont.

- Compiled by Paul Krawzak,  
Copley News Service

## *Lawmaker's low airfares*

# Program saves money, but at cost of reality a check

By BILL HILLBURG  
Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON – The Feds really know how to fly.

Thanks to a government partnership program with major air carriers, millions of federal employees, including bureaucrats and lawmakers charged with regulating the airline industry, enjoy discounts up to 90 percent off full fares and other advantages when they take to the skies on official business.

Proponents of the General Service Administration's Paired Cities travel program call it a win-win proposition for the government, which saves an estimated \$2 billion taxpayer dollars per year on more than one million official business flights; and the 14 participating major airlines, which fill tens of thousands of otherwise empty seats.

Critics argue that the program, which insulates federal travelers from such vexing practices as dizzying arrays of discounts, blackout periods, non-refundable fares and cancellation fees, leaves bureaucrats and lawmakers clueless as to many of the challenges faced by the traveling public (see chart).

"The GSA has done an outstanding job and has saved the taxpayers billions of dollars," said Rep. Stephen Horn, R-Long Beach, a member of the Transportation Subcommittee on Aviation.

Horn and his fellow Southland House members are among the government's most frequent flyers. Most area lawmakers return home weekly when Congress is in session. They often fly home on Thursday nights and return to

the Capitol late Monday, in time for the first scheduled vote of the week.

Those trips home, including longer breaks over holiday periods, are designated under House and Senate rules as "district work periods" and qualify as official government business. Travel home for election purposes is not covered by the GSA program. It must be arranged by the lawmakers and paid for out of campaign funds.

Lawmakers, who make \$145,100 per year, pay for their air fares and other official travel costs out of their representation budgets, which average \$975,000 taxpayer dollars per year for each House member and up to \$3 million for senators. Those budgets also cover staff salaries, rent on district offices and other operating costs.

Rep. Brad Sherman, D-Woodlands Hills, who estimated he travels 90,000 miles per year by air, said the cross-country commuting is a necessity. He also credited the GSA with "doing an amazing job of negotiating their travel deal."

"I don't travel to my district, I live in my district," said Sherman. "I visit Washington when compelled to do so by the Speaker of the House for official business. Constituents also demand my presence. Nobody asks me 'why didn't you stay in Washington?' They ask 'why weren't you here?'"

"Lawmakers are frequent flyers, so they are familiar with many of the service problems, including delays with one out of four flights," said Paul Hudson, director of the Aviation Consumer Action Project, a

## "Pen-and-pad" briefings

# Not just inside baseball at Hill dugouts

By CARL WEISER  
Gannett News Service

WASHINGTON – You can sometimes find regionals at the informal briefings held by Senate and House leaders – waiting by the door.

The top party leaders in both the House and Senate hold relatively regular briefings for the media, called "pen-and-pad" briefings, dugouts, or just media availabilities.

Most of the talk is about the day-to-day minutiae and partisan maneuvering that sustain the daily and weekly Capitol Hill publications. Regionals usually skip them.

But regionals can get good tidbits from them, if only because they provide scheduled access to the top dogs in Congress.

The stories we're working are often pretty obscure to be worth bugging the House Speaker or Minority Leader about.

But that doesn't stop us. We're regionals.

Scripps Howard's Jennifer Sergent lingered after one of Minority Leader Dick Gephardt's briefings to ask him about a cousin of his who was running for Congress in Florida.

"We're helping her in every way we can," Gephardt told Sergent. "I think she's got a great chance." (She lost by 20 percentage points.)

Sometimes a local issue may rise to national prominence, and then it's worth stopping in. You can at least tell your editors that Sen. Trent Lott talked about forest fires or bankruptcy reform or a local labor dispute.

I stopped in at House Majority Leader Dick Arme's pen and pad briefing during the Amtrak shutdown crisis this

### If you go

■ Both Sen. **Trent Lott** and **Tom Daschle's** dugouts are usually with cameras. You can see them on C-Span. They usually hold them just about every day when Congress is in session in their respective offices, S-224 for Daschle and S-230 for Lott. There's usually a transcript available later in the day in the Senate press gallery, as well as on Nexis.

■ With House Majority Whip **Dick Arme** retiring and House Minority Leader **Richard Gephardt** leaving his post, new schedules for their successors have yet to be determined. Arme's briefings generally were held in H-219 at noon on Tuesdays while Gephardt held Thursday morning briefings in H-206.

For both Arme and Gephardt, there were usually transcripts delivered much later in the day to the House Press Gallery.

■ House Speaker **Dennis Hastert** has briefings, but only about once a month and for a short time. They are in H-210.

■ GNS' national congressional correspondent Jon Frandsen offers this tip: tune into the colloquy at the end of the week between party leaders that takes place on the House floor. That will tell you what's coming next week.

past summer. I figured it would come up on its own, and it did.

He said that Amtrak could get the money it needed, but only if Democrats were willing to give the Republicans something: an increase in the federal debt limit.

"There are a lot of members of the House who don't have all this heartfelt affection for Amtrak," he said, a quote I used in the story.

Gannett News Service's Kate Scott, who until recently covered for the largest newspaper in South Dakota, attended every one of Sen. Daschle's dugouts when she first started covering him, "to get a sense of him, establish myself with his staff and pick up news tidbits." She would also feed quotes to other reporters.

But later she attended them as any other regional, using them as a way to get on-the-record quotes for regional stories.

"I would position myself near the door where he exited and catch his eye. I would say "Sioux Falls," and he would pause long enough to answer one or two questions," she said.

Gannett News Service's Susan Roth, who covers for Gannett's upstate New York newspapers, said they were a good way to get leaders on the record, since they're not going to call regionals back on the phone.

"You usually have a pretty good chance to ask your question if you are aggressive. So you can get a good quote for your story that can indicate whether your rep/senator's pet legislation has any chance of going anywhere or whether he or she is in step with leadership on a particular issue," said Roth.

## IRAQ

Continued from Page 1

Felker plans to try to go to Kuwait nevertheless.

"They are working on finding people from my area who are there full time or on rotation there, and I want to get them and photos in the paper either for Thanksgiving or Christmas coverage, assuming the bombs don't start dropping earlier," Felker said. "Then I hope to return for a couple of weeks when (OK, if?) the war starts."

### **"If you have a significant number of guard and reservists mobilized, it might justify a trip to wherever they are."**

– Otto Kreisher,  
Copley News Service

You don't have to cover a major military base to take that approach. You can do the same thing if National Guard and reserve forces from your area get the call to report to active duty.

You can begin preparing now by doing an inventory of the units in your area and their duties. Otto Kreisher, who covers the Pentagon for Copley News Service, said Air National Guard or Reserve flight crews that fly fighter jets, transport planes and refueling tankers will almost certainly be called to war.

Ground units in logistics, communications, public affairs, civil affairs and engineering are also likely to get the call, particularly for the after-war occupation. Kreisher said combat units are less likely to be called up, and other units will be called up for duty outside the war zone.

"If you have a significant number of guard and reservists mobilized, it



### Story ideas

Of course, the war stories won't begin and end with the troops. Here's a series of other story ideas from your RRA colleagues:

- Take a look at the defense contractors in your region and how the weapons or equipment they make are being used in the war, said Dori Meinert of Copley, who did that during the Gulf War. Don't forget to check with defense watchdog groups, too, to see if those weapons are cost-efficient and effective.
- Sure, Congress has already passed a use-of-force resolution, but be sure to keep in touch with your members to see how they feel about their votes once the shooting starts.
- It also might be interesting to do what Carl Weiser of Gannett News Service did: tracing the military record – or lack thereof – of your local congressional delegation.
- You could also talk to local veterans about their reactions to the war – and don't forget to let the anti-war groups have their say, too.

might justify a trip to wherever they are," Kreisher said. "The guard and reserve almost always are eager to promote their contributions and willing to help."

It may be harder to find local troops, though, if you don't have a major base or mobilized Guard or reserve unit in your area. In that case, Kreisher suggests putting a notice in the paper, asking families of troops to contact you with information on their loved ones and where they're serving.

Since most units will have Internet access, you might even be able to arrange for periodic Email letters from local troops on the front lines or in

direct support of the war effort, Kreisher added. Get a picture of each letter writer beforehand, and you'll have a nice local complement to the national war coverage.

You also might be able to quotes from hometown troops by skimming through the vast notebooks of pool reports filed by reporters at the front. Those pool reports will be available on the National Press Club's web site, said Tammy Lytle of the Orlando Sentinel.

Lytle did that during the Gulf War and did a story on the local troops' viewpoint – supplemented by calls to their families back home.

## PROGRAM

Continued from Page 4

Washington-based watchdog group founded by Ralph Nader. "But they know very little about the high cost of fares for small business owners and families."

"Members of Congress have so many perks, including these cheap flights, that they lose track of what it's like to be an ordinary citizen," said Gary Ruskin, director of the Congressional Accountability Project, another Nader watchdog group. "But I am all for travel. It gets lawmakers away from all the lobbyists here in Washington."

"A different issue is why do government workers have to travel so much?," said Lewis K. Uhler, president of the National Tax Limitation Committee, which is based in Roseville, near Sacramento. Why don't they telecommute? We have the technology."

But Uhler agreed with Ruskin that federal travel has its upside, especially for members of Congress. "I'm all in favor of doubling their travel time," he said of lawmakers. "A Congress that is not in session cannot hurt you."

Lawmakers and millions of other civilian and military employees in the GSA program all fly coach class (Ruskin argues that no House member in his right mind would want to be seen sitting in first class by constituents heading for the cheap seats), but that's where the similarities end between government and public travel.

While the airline industry touts the fact that its deregulated skies have translated into discounts averaging 66 percent on the majority of its seats, obtaining cheap fares calls for vigi-

lance by the general public and travel agents.

Bookings must be made weeks or months in advance, seats covered by special offers are limited, fares are often non-refundable and penalties averaging \$100 are levied for itinerary changes. For example, airline tickets sold over the Internet by Priceline.com carry many of those restrictions and also bar buyers from collecting frequent flyer miles.

In addition, blackout periods imposed by airlines mean that many discount offers are suspended during prime public and family flying times, including major holidays and summer months that coincide with school vacations.

But every day is a deep air fare discount day for the feds, who can fly anytime and anywhere as long as a seat is available. Changes and cancellations are accommodated at no additional cost and frequent flyer miles are awarded. The GSA and its major airline contractors also feature a large number of nonstop flights. Intervening stops are limited to one per flight with a scheduled layover of no more than 90 minutes.

House members enjoy a few additional goodies. While most feds, like many business travelers in the private sector, must turn in their frequent flyer miles to employers to pay for additional trips, lawmakers get to keep their miles and use them as they see fit. House members also get free parking at Washington's Reagan and Dulles airports, a perk worth up to \$14 per day.

The GSA flying program, which also uses government credit cards, issued to employees to handle and

track expenses, was established as part of a 1978 federal law, approved by Congress and signed by President Jimmy Carter, that deregulated the airline industry and cleared the way for competition on routes and fares.

"We had a need for travel and to cut costs and the airlines needed to fill seats," said Jeff Koses, a GSA official who oversees the air travel operation. "This program has filled all of those needs." Koses noted that competition among major airlines for federal business has resulted "in some absolutely unbelievable government fares, especially on heavily traveled routes like Washington to Los Angeles."

Joe Hopkins, spokesman for United Airlines, said the federal program generates an estimated \$300 million per year of fare income for the Chicago-based carrier. He said that United and other airlines bid for government business based on both government and public demand, as well as traffic levels.

"We give large discounts on busy routes like those serving Los Angeles," explained Hopkins. "And the discounts are less to cities with more limited service. We want to fill as many seats as possible, but we also have to make sure we don't limit seats for the public by allotting too many for the government program."

"Our planes are not 100 percent full all of the time, but as a regularly scheduled carrier, we must fly and keep to our schedules, especially for connecting flights," added Hopkins, who said United, even with the addition of government passengers, operates with an average seat capacity of 71 percent. This program really works for both sides."

MEETING MINUTES

October 7

Present: Marc Heller, Samantha Young, Angela Greiling, Lisa Friedman, Jessica Wehrman, Katherine Scott, Jake Thompson

Heller launched the meeting by asking the board whether Jim Sergent's contract to design the newsletter should be retroactive. Friedman suggested the board make the contract run from June to June - the Regional Reporters Association's version of a year. Heller and the board informally agreed, then Heller said he was waiting to get the contract from attorney Kevin

Goldberg.

He then asked Scott about printing the newsletter. The board plans to print up about 50 newsletters and distribute them at the press club and both press galleries on Capitol Hill. Crane will print out the PDF copies. The board decided to make the print-ups for a few months as a recruiting tool, and will include a story in the newsletter about the fact that it's being used as a recruiting tool.

Discussion on the survey was tabled.

Greiling said she will work on a steel newsmaker for after the election. Scott said the earliest she can get Sen. Tom Daschle for a newsmaker would be next year. Friedman said the IRE wanted the RRA membership list to recruit for an upcoming conference. Board members agreed they would send a message about the IRE conference on their listserv. They agreed they did not want to give out information on membership.

The next meeting was Nov. 11.

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

Please fill in the following information and return it with your \$20 dues payment to:

The Regional Reporters Association, Ben Franklin Station, P.O. Box 254 Washington, DC 20054-0254

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Organization: \_\_\_\_\_ DOB: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City,State: \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP code: \_\_\_\_\_

Office Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Home Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Fax: \_\_\_\_\_ email: \_\_\_\_\_

New applicant  Renewal

Please list the publications or stations that you work for, including city and state:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_