



November 1, 2006

Rep. Nancy Pelosi
Office of the House Democratic Leader
H-204, The Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congresswoman Pelosi:

As the largest organization representing America's trade, professional and philanthropic associations, the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE), Washington, DC, supports your call for "honest leadership and open government" in the 110th Congress. However, we are concerned that one important proposal in your ethics reform package would hinder the educational dialogue between members of Congress and the close to 100 million members of associations and other nonprofit organizations in the U.S.

ASAE understands and supports the need for greater accountability and transparency in government, but we believe a ban on privately-funded congressional travel would pose a serious threat to the exchange between Congress and associations that represent a profession or group of individuals – the people who may in many cases be on the front lines of an issue, uniquely qualified to share their perspectives on how legislation might directly impact them and their trade, profession or charitable cause. Such a ban seems counter-productive to the legislative process and the development of sound, well-constructed and substantive laws.

For the purposes of further discussion, ASAE believes Congress should consider a pre-approval process for travel, where a common-sense distinction can be made between unnecessary, recreationally-driven trips to exotic locales and educational trips to an association meeting or conference. ASAE contends that trips of this latter variety, outside Washington where legislators can engage in an informal exchange of views with a broad array of individuals, are vitally important for elected officials charged with understanding a huge range of issues and crafting legislation accordingly.

The House Ethics Committee prepared a pre-approval process for members of Congress and their staff just this past summer. ASAE has every confidence that this committee can develop procedures for certifying proposed trips as educational or fact-finding trips in compliance with House rules and the public's expectations for legitimate travel.

Associations represent America, and in no small way. Approximately 97 million U.S. and 16 million international members pay dues to a U.S. trade or professional association. The primary reason they belong to associations is for education and training. Nearly all associations (94%) invest in education and training programs for their members and the principal vehicle for delivering that education and training is via meetings and conferences across the U.S. In 2005, 21 million people attended association trade shows, conventions, conferences and seminars and nearly 5 million attended committee and board meetings. These association events are enhanced by the attendance of members of Congress or congressional staff who can share with attendees the thinking back on Capitol Hill and gather valuable feedback from those attendees that they might not otherwise obtain.

ASAE strongly believes that if congressional travel were entirely funded by taxpayers, members of Congress would be less inclined to accept an invitation to attend an association or nonprofit meeting outside of Washington, DC. This would without a doubt be a “lose-lose” outcome, and an unintended consequence of your proposed reform package.

ASAE respectfully requests an opportunity to have a dialogue on this issue with you and your staff prior to the start of the 110th Congress. It is vitally important that Congress adopt rules and regulations that meet the test for accountability and ethical responsibility, without cutting off legislators’ access to the thoughts and perspectives of millions of people attending association and nonprofit meetings outside the nation’s capital. I encourage you to contact Jim Clarke, ASAE’s senior vice president of public policy, at 202-626-2703 or by email at jclarke@asaenet.org.

Sincerely,

John H. Graham IV, CAE
President and CEO