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Boehner Defends Ties to Lobbyists Monday, February 6, 2006

By **Richard A. Serrano** Los Angeles Times

WASHINGTON -- Rep. John A. Boehner, the new House majority leader who himself has been criticized for cozying up to Washington lobbyists, said Sunday that the public should know more about the ways lawmakers interact with the lobbying industry, but he also stressed that politicians should not automatically stop taking trips paid for by special-interest groups.



John A. Boehner

The Ohio Republican was making his first appearances on the Sunday political talk shows since his election Thursday to replace Rep. Tom DeLay, R-Texas. He vigorously defended ties to lobbyists -- both his own and his colleagues' -- as essential for any member of Congress trying to understand national and world issues.

He said that, as long as trips are approved by the House ethics committee, representatives should be allowed to accept travel sponsored by outside groups, and he defended his own trips -- six to Boca Raton, Fla., four to Scottsdale, Ariz., and others to Rome, Venice and Paris. House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert, R-Ill., has proposed a ban on privately funded trips.

If it meets the rules of the House, "we ought to allow members to do it," Boehner told "Fox News Sunday." "We can't lock members up in a cubbyhole here in Washington and never let them see what's going on around the country and around the world."

As for his own trips, he said on NBC's "Meet the Press" that "people invite me to give speeches, and I go give them."

At the same time, Boehner encouraged both political parties in the House and Senate to continue discussing lobbying reform, an issue likely to grow heated this year given the recent guilty pleas by lobbyist Jack Abramoff to federal fraud and conspiracy charges and the forthcoming trial of DeLay on state money-laundering charges in Texas.

"We need to deal with the underlying problems we have today," Boehner told Fox. "And I believe that disclosure of the relationship

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between those who lobby, whether they be paid lobbyists here in Washington, those from agencies, or others," would help "let the American people take a look at how this relationship works."

Since his elevation to the second-highest position in the Republican-controlled House -- one that some political observers speculate could make him speaker of the House before the decade is over -- Boehner has come under attack for his ties to lobbyists.

According to the Center for Public Integrity, a nonprofit investigative journalism organization in Washington, at least 14 Capitol Hill aides who served under Boehner in Congress now work as lobbyists. PoliticalMoneyLine, another private group in Washington that tracks campaign financing, listed him at No. 10 of the 535 members of Congress accepting privately funded trips since January 2000.

In addition, unlike other lawmakers linked to the disgraced Abramoff, Boehner has declined to return more than \$27,000 his political action campaign received from American Indian tribes that Abramoff represented.

"I didn't know Jack Abramoff. I may have met him once," Boehner told NBC. Then, saying he had worked with the tribes on education and labor issues, he added, "Why would I give the money back?"

Boehner defended his predecessor as majority leader but added that, while he believes DeLay is not guilty of the charges against him, he would not relinquish his new post should the Texas congressman be acquitted and want it back.

"I'm sure we'll talk about it," Boehner told NBC. But, he added, "We had an election, and I won."

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