

Inside Rep. Feeney's dorm room

Contributed by Betsy Rothstein
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Walking through the dingy gray hallways of the C Street apartment building, it is hard to believe that anyone important lives here.

More college dorm than apartment building, it is then startling to see the clean-cut, impeccably dressed Rep. Tom Feeney (R-Fla.), former Speaker of the Florida House, walk into the place he calls home. He's the picture of congressional perfection in a powder blue, button-down shirt, pinstriped gray trousers and a dark blue striped tie.

Feeney, 48, who has lived here since he came to Congress in 2003, allegedly had the one-bedroom apartment professionally cleaned before The Hill came to report this invasive story. But you wouldn't know it. Even after the \$180 maid service did its best, you walk into a scene of cluttered papers, ties thrown into heaps on three wall racks, and a bed apparently thrown together in a mad rush of lumps and wrinkles.

One thing is certain: Feeney, all smiles and upbeat, is proud of his Washington dwelling, bunk bed and all. The bunks are for when his sons, Tommy, 14, and Sean, 8, or his father, another Tom Feeney, come to visit. The lawmaker crashes in a king-size bed that monopolizes the main room.

Feeney relishes the dumpy, decrepit quality of it all and boasts of the famous standing-room-only "Penthouse Party" fundraiser he holds here every year and The New York Times Sunday magazine piece written about the apartment when its occupant was a freshman.

The party, he says, as though he still can't believe it, attracts such a crowd that people must wait in the lobby until Feeney staffers usher in five guests at a time. It's late fall this year. Given the venue, it's a low-dollar event. But the overhead is small - Diet Coke, Budweiser, Oreo cookies and Ritz crackers - so it raises a tidy \$26,000.

The bottom bunk seems the best place to sit for the interview. (Other than that there's only the floor or the "master" bed and both would seem, well, awkward.)

The place is indeed awkward, but it's unkempt rather than dirty. This is progress from his law school days, when classmates referred to him as Oscar Madison. "Anything growing in here is accidental," he jokes. But the truth is, the apartment puts one at ease. The fabrics are soft. You don't worry about breaking anything or spilling something on the tired old carpet.

"I'm comfortable," says Feeney, which makes two of us. "I wouldn't want anything more than this. For late-night votes I can come and lie down. I don't want a car to worry about. This is ideal."

Feeney looks on the bright side of things. He spins his party's collapse into minority status as delivering an almost therapeutic laid-back state of being. "In policy goals you're not micromanaging details and passing important policy," he explains. "You want to propose good policy, but you're not going to change the country in a positive way [but rather, prevent] bad things from happening and pointing out hypocrisy. It's disappointing and frustrating because there are problems you want to solve and your ability is limited.

"There's very little planning to do. Every day you are responding to [Speaker] Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and the Democratic leadership.

"You're doing a lot more politics and marketing," he says. "I'll probably do a lot more press in the minority than the majority. In the minority it's about selling a better message."

But back to the apartment - or, specifically, the refrigerator. Not much planning here, either; it contains a variety of items that seem to want to get together for a picnic, but lack a few key elements, such as hamburger and buns. There's natural Vermont cheddar cheese, mustard, pickles, Oreo Cookies, Cheese Whiz and crackers, caramels and water. There is also a package of liverwurst of uncertain vintage. "I don't know what else you could want in life," says Feeney simply.

Florida dietitians recently visited him. "They were really concerned about my health," said the tanned and fit congressman.

He is clearly conscious of the way he looks. Not a blond Floridian hair is out of place, although the lawmaker doesn't give the impression of being prissy about it. On a bedside dresser are a can of Right Guard Sport, Givenchy cologne (a gift) and a bottle of fish oil vitamins.

Feeney says the apartment is "more organized than usual." He looks upward. "The smoke detector went off while cooking pizza so I had to disconnect it," he says. The disconnected alarm now commands space on the coffee table.

Feeney doesn't always live like a 20-year-old bachelor. His real home, 70 miles from the beach in Oviedo, Fla., is a 3,600-square-foot house in a cul de sac. There are five bedrooms, four bathrooms and a pool. "It's a house for boys and

football players" and a Black Labrador called Micky, he says.

Feeney is focused on the 2008 presidential election (not for himself, mind you). He endorsed former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney (R) early on. "I waited until Jeb Bush's key friends had signed up for a campaign," he says, explaining that his first choice would have been the Florida governor and his second would have been ousted Sen. Rick Santorum (R-Pa.) had either opted to run.

So here he is with Romney, his apparent third choice. Feeney looks pained at the prospect of Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.) in the White House. "I think it would be very bad for the country," he says. "I'd hope we'd remain intact." And then he notes an upside: "I think Hillary Clinton would be very good for the conservative movement. It would rally the average American back to the conservative principles of Ronald Reagan. Middle America would be Republican for a spell."

But let's get back to his third choice - Romney. "Mitt is most clearly articulating the principles of conservative values," Feeney says, explaining that he had met with Romney for 45 minutes to an hour and listened to his newfound takes on gays and abortion. "I convinced myself that he's had a genuine change of heart on these issues."

Next subject: President Bush. "He's been a political cross to bear," says Feeney. "His numbers are in the dumps." Looking back on the elections, he says, "Foley and other scandals clearly cost [us] on six to eight seats."

Feeney served alongside Foley in the Florida House in 1990. "We were never social buddies," the congressman is quick to say. "I thought there was a good chance that his sexual preferences were different than mine."

OK - last word on his apartment. Feeney says it draws people in. Never mind the large green plastic trash can in the middle of the room. "People come and they all tell stories about the worst place they ever lived."

And what was his? "A basement apartment in Ocean City [N.J.] with four guys that later got condemned. It was in bad shape when I got there and worse when we left."