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Westmoreland starts House revolt that lasts hours; Republicans demand vote on American Energy Act

As the Democrats gaveled the House to a close today for a five-week recess and turned off the microphones, U.S. Rep. Lynn Westmoreland took to the floor and began speaking to tourists in the House Gallery about the Democrats lack of action on lowering gas prices.

Following Westmoreland's lead other Republican members of the House lined up to give speeches as visitors in the gallery clapped and cheered. The debate has now gone on for five hours and continues. The Hill newspaper tells of Westmoreland's role in the revolt.

LEADING THE NEWS

GOP talks energy in shuttered House

By Jackie Kucinich

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The microphones are off, the C-SPAN cameras are no longer running in the House chamber, but all is not silent as a group of House Republicans has stayed behind to continue to speak about energy issues.

Rep. Lynn Westmoreland (R-Ga.) began the protest, which included about 20 GOPers who chose not to make the traditional mad dash for the airport following adjournment. Instead, they gave speeches on the empty floor to protest that Congress went into recess and to raise awareness of what they say is an unwillingness by Democrats to take up legislation to deal with the nation's energy crisis.

"There were about 40 people lined up to speak, and Democrats adjourned to keep us from doing the special orders," Westmoreland said. "I was looking around and trying to figure out what we were going to do and just decided to go down to the well and started talking to the people in the galleries."

Among the GOP members who lined up to speak were Minority Leader John Boehner (Ohio), Minority Whip Roy Blunt (Mo.), Reps. Michael Burgess (Texas), John Campbell (Calif.), Eric

Cantor (Va.), Shelley Moore Capito (W.Va.), John Carter (Texas), John Culberson (Texas), Charlie Dent (Pa.), Jeff Fortenberry (Neb.), Virginia Foxx (N.C.), Louie Gohmert (Texas), Duncan Hunter (Calif.), Thaddeus McCotter (Mich.), Mike Pence (Ind.), Tom Price (Ga.), Ted Poe (Texas), Adam Putnam (Fla.), Bill Sali (Idaho), John Shadegg (Ariz.), John Shimkus (Ill.) and Tim Walberg (Mich.).

Others received word as they were leaving town and turned around to join their colleagues on the House floor. Texas GOP Rep. Kevin Brady left his seat on an airplane departing for the Lone Star State and was greeted by a standing ovation when he entered the chamber.

Formal dress was not a requirement. Rep. Mike Rogers (R-Mich.) showed up in khaki shorts and sandals.

At one point, the Republicans began to interact with people in the gallery who were shouting questions to the floor, such as : "So when are we going to do something to actually bring down energy prices?"

Members also traded off turns sitting in the press gallery, a move necessary to keep it open.

Nadeam Elshami, a spokesman for Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), chalked the display up to politics. At one point the lights went off but were later turned back on. The microphones were also eventually turned on, according to staff present. In addition, the Capitol Police tried to shut down the press gallery at one point but Shadegg ensured that it remained open.

"Republicans are too scared to go home to face their constituents after voting against bills to force Big Oil companies to use it or lose it, demand that the president free our oil from the government stockpile and crack down on speculators," Elshami said. "In a week where Exxon Mobil made the largest quarterly profits by a U.S. corporation, Republicans are staying in Washington to argue that Big Oil deserves more taxpayer lands."

He added, "That sums up their priorities."

The House floor filled with constituents, staff and members was an extraordinary sight for any day, but particularly noticeable on the day when lawmakers were supposed to be heading home for a month of campaigning and rest. The last time members stayed on the floor after the House had adjourned was in 1995, and that time it was Democrats leading the protest.

It was unclear as to when Republicans would relinquish the floor. But the gallery closes to the public at 4:30 p.m.

This story was updated at 3 p.m.