



Langevin set to preside as first member in wheelchair

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By Jordy Yager

Rep. Jim Langevin (D-R.I.) will become the first lawmaker to ever preside over the House in a wheelchair when he serves as Speaker pro tempore next week. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) said Langevin is scheduled to access the Speaker's rostrum Monday using a new mechanical lift. Langevin had been unable to preside over the House because the rostrum has two sets of two stairs.

“When [Langevin] picks up that gavel, it will be an historic moment for the Congress,” Pelosi said. “His service in the Congress — every day that he comes to the floor, he has instructed Members in a way — changed their thinking, transformed their attitudes.” Langevin's milestone coincides with the 20th anniversary of the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

“It's going to be certainly an incredibly powerful moment for me personally,” said Langevin in an interview with The Hill. “But even more importantly I think it's an incredibly important moment for the country and the message that it sends to people with disabilities that nothing is impossible and that we should let no barriers stand in our way.”

Langevin said that the newly altered rostrum was important for the next generation of people with disabilities, including the military men and women returning from combat in Iraq and Afghanistan who can see it and know that their physical condition doesn't limit the scope of their accomplishments.

The modified rostrum was slated for completion last fall, but due in part to faulty mechanics, was delayed for nearly 10 months. Among other adjustments, the construction crew — working under the supervision of the Architect of the Capitol (AoC) Stephen Ayers — was able to muffle the sounds that come from the lift.

The alterations to the rostrum, which hosts the Speaker pro tempore and the House clerks each day the chamber is in session, are nearly invisible when the lift is not in use. On the east side of the rostrum is a slight break in the dark blue carpeting where a section of the floor descends from each set of two stairs. Once the wheelchair is in place and secure, the flooring then ascends back up the stairs and slides over, becoming flush once again with the rest of the rostrum's flooring.

Langevin said that the modified rostrum was one of the last main aspects of the antiquated infrastructure in the House that needed to be adjusted to comply with ADA

standards. He credited many people, including Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-Md.), who was instrumental in passing the ADA.

“Twenty years ago on Monday, the Americans with Disabilities Act strongly committed our country to inclusion and equal opportunities for people with disabilities,” Hoyer said.

“It was a great bipartisan accomplishment, and I was proud to have helped make it happen.”

“For years, Congressman Langevin has been deprived of the chance to do a job that’s open to each and every other member of the majority party: presiding over the House floor as Speaker pro tempore,” Hoyer said.

Langevin’s ascension as Speaker pro tempore next Monday will not be the first time a person with a disability will have presided over the lower chamber. Former Speaker of the House from 1899-1903, Rep. David Bremner Henderson, had lost a limb while serving in the Civil War and would climb up to the rostrum using a wooden leg, according to the office of the House Historian.

The modification of the House rostrum is also not the first time that the chamber has been adjusted. Within the last decade, there were 448 seats in the House chamber, but two were removed to accommodate wheelchair accessibility, leaving 446 seats present.