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ARIZONA LAWMAKER DROPS BAN ON JOURNALISTS WHO REFUSE CHECKS

BY BOB CHRISTIE
ASSOCIATED PRESS

PHOENIX (AP) -- The speaker of the Arizona House of Representatives allowed journalists who refused to submit to extensive background checks back on the floor of the chamber Tuesday amid pressure from lawmakers and the public over the sudden shift in decades-old policy.



AP Photo/Ryan VanVelzer

Republican House Speaker David Gowan banned reporters last week who refused to comply with new security rules requiring extensive criminal and civil background checks. He said the checks were needed after several disruptions in public areas in the House and the Capitol.

Media organizations criticized the move, saying it could hinder the ability to hold lawmakers accountable. Journalists were forced to cover House sessions from the public gallery area and lost access to legislators.

Reporters who routinely cover the House receive credentials and get access to the chamber's floor through an electronic key card. For decades, they had desks to do their work. When the House isn't in session, reporters can talk to lawmakers and ask questions about important legislation and other matters. It's a key method for journalists to get to know and understand the positions of lawmakers in both major parties.

While reporters will again be allowed on the floor, Gowan will not restore key-card access that allowed journalists to freely come and go from the chamber, spokeswoman Stephanie Grisham said. Instead, reporters will have to sign in with the chief clerk to get to the floor and sign out when they leave.

She acknowledged the backlash that erupted after the decision to bar reporters.

"He has heard his members, and he has heard the public, and he has compromised," Grisham said of Gowan.

Gowan changed the rules after the Arizona Capitol Times reported in January that the lawmaker was using a state vehicle and collecting per diems while traveling the state to campaign for Congress. Gowan repaid the state more than \$12,000 after the report and took the unusual step of asking the Arizona attorney general to investigate whether he broke the law. He has denied he intentionally misused state resources.

The publisher of the Capitol Times suggested the changes had to do with its investigative journalism that has exposed Gowan to heightened scrutiny. The policy Gowan imposed would bar anyone convicted of a felony in the past 10 years or misdemeanors within five years. The Capitol Times reporter who discovered Gowan's vehicle use would have been banned because of a minor misdemeanor conviction.

House Democrats, who are in the minority, publicly criticized the policy. They tried to change House rules Tuesday to severely limit when reporters could be denied access to the floor, but Republicans quashed the effort on a 24-34 party-line vote.

The Democratic House leader said the ban "created a diversion from doing the work the people and our constituents sent us here to do."

"Obviously, we think it should have never been done it the first place - there was never any risk from a reporter," Minority Leader Eric Meyer said. "This took us away from the task at hand, which is to address the budget, finish up session, fund our schools and invest in our universities."

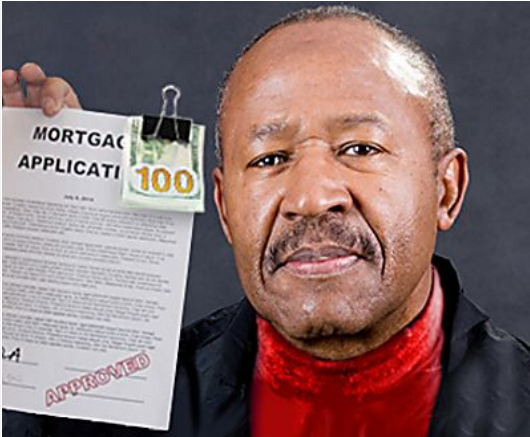
But Gowan did not apologize for barring reporters.

"The safety and security of the employees and members who work in the building remain a priority for leadership and me," Gowan wrote in a letter to House members. "I had a duty to everyone who works in the House to act quickly and decisively to provide a safe environment in the wake of the chaotic and potentially dangerous events that you all witnessed on March 28."

That was the day a protester in the public gallery was arrested after a disturbance related to lengthy wait times in Arizona's presidential primary.

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