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Reporters' access restricted

L.A. County issues no similar edict to others at board's meetings.

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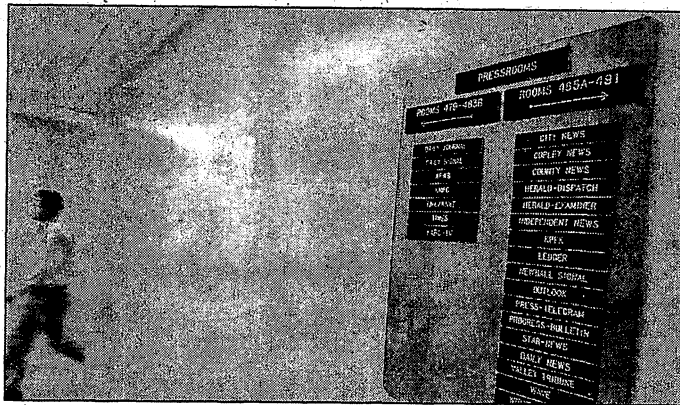
Los Angeles County officials have been complaining for years about the ever-decreasing number of reporters who cover them.

The county press room, once bustling with a dozen or more reporters, now looks like a ghost town, home to three reporters on a good day.

Nonetheless, the Board of Supervisors has decided that the few journalists still around are causing problematic "traffic jams" during board meetings. So supervisors have decreed that reporters can no longer interview key personnel in the back rooms and corridors where the officials work during board meetings.

For more than a decade, the areas immediately behind the county supervisors' meeting room have been available for credentialed reporters to interview department heads and key aides, with very limited exceptions. But in recent weeks, the supervisors' executive office asked public safety officers to usher reporters away and issued a memorandum limiting reporters to a room and hallway that usually are empty.

"As a reminder, members of



GENARO MOLINA Los Angeles Times

OUTDATED: Most of the media outlets listed on this directory no longer work out of L.A. County's press room.

the media are not permitted in the department head areas and all interviews are to be conducted in the press room or the hallway located on the east side of the executive office behind the board room," wrote Sachi Hamai, the supervisors' executive officer.

No similar memorandum was issued to target the lobbyists, union representatives and other advocates who sometimes walk the back rooms.

Although Hamai and supervisors' aides cast the prohibition for reporters as a "reminder" of "prior policy," she was unable to provide documentation that the policy had been previously issued.

Tony Bell, a spokesman for Supervisor Mike Antonovich, said the policy was needed to prevent "traffic jams." David

Sommers, a spokesman for Supervisor Don Knabe, said the policy was "reasonable." Joel Bellman, a spokesman for Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky, said: "I don't have a problem with it."

The restrictions come at a time when the county is significantly increasing its own public relations efforts, in part because they say the media don't provide enough coverage.

Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas has expanded his public affairs staff to include a second press aide and a multimedia specialist. Yaroslavsky is investing tens of thousands of dollars to expand his office's website. The overhaul is overseen by an aide with a salary of \$130,000 and is helped by two contract writers earning \$36,000 each. Also assisting is an outside Web design consultant. The board is also considering expanding county government's television operation.

Some board meeting regulars questioned whether the reporters cause traffic jams.

"This prohibition against the reporters really upsets me," said Geneviève M. Clavreul, a Pasadena resident who sits in the first row during board meetings and has complained about the access that lobbyists have to back areas. "We hardly have any reporters left anyway. I wonder what they are afraid the reporters will find out."

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