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For Some, Energy Bill's Name Wasn't So Sweet

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What's in a name? To Members of Congress, everything.

After years of painstaking negotiations and last-minute setbacks, senior lawmakers in the House and Senate have finally achieved a breakthrough that should allow for passage of a massive energy bill. The legislation could reach the floor in either chamber as early as today, but as a vote approached, one more hurdle remained: What should the bill be called?

House and Senate Republicans wanted to name it the "Domenici-Barton Energy Independence Act of 2005," in honor of Sen. Pete Domenici (R-N.M.), chairman of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, and Rep. Joe Barton (R-Texas), chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee. The two Republicans led the drive for passage of the bill, and Senate GOP leaders in particular wanted to honor Domenici, a member of that body since 1972.

In fact, several drafts of the bill that circulated on Capitol Hill late Tuesday night were titled "Domenici-Barton," and that's what staff on both sides of the Capitol were privately calling it. Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.) and Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) approved the name change on Tuesday night, according to GOP leadership sources.

Rep. John Dingell (D-Mich.), ranking member on the Energy and Commerce Committee, didn't have any problems with that title, and even declined an invitation by Barton to attach his own name to the legislation, according to staff.

But Senate Democrats, especially Sen. Jeff Bingaman (D-N.M.) and his aides, didn't like the idea. Bingaman, ranking member on the Energy and Natural Resources Committee and Domenici's colleague for the last 23 years (and a fellow New Mexican), warned Senate GOP leaders that he and other Democrats would raise obstacles in bringing the legislation to the floor if it was called the "Domenici-Barton" bill.

Such opposition surprised and angered top Senate Republicans. It also forced them to delay filing the conference report until new copies of the huge bill, each several thousand pages long, could be printed up and distributed.

"I think it's very disrespectful to Sen. Domenici," said a Senate Republican staffer familiar with the dispute. "It certainly delayed the filing of the bill." Another Republican aide was just as angry: "This is one of the most petty acts taken against one of the most beloved members of the Senate in a long time."

Bill Wicker, the Democratic spokesman for the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, said Bingaman did not oppose the "short title" of the bill but objected to how Republicans arrived at it.

"When everybody went home [Tuesday] night, it was called one thing and when everybody returned this morning it was named another thing," Wicker said on Wednesday. "He didn't have a problem per se with the name, but he did with the process."

Bingaman "had a problem with the lack of consultation with the Democratic leadership" on naming the bill, Wicker added.

Wicker noted that Bingaman views the energy bill as "bipartisan work product and is the result of a bipartisan approach here in the United States Senate."

Domenici's office did not return several phone calls seeking comment for this story.

When it was first brought up in the House, the energy bill (H.R. 6) was simply called the "Energy Policy Act of 2005." It kept that name throughout debate in the House and Senate.

But after the House-Senate conference became bogged down over contentious issues such as cleaning up drinking water contaminated by a gasoline additive and funding for alternative sources of energy, Domenici and Barton, after five years of frustration, finally managed to craft a consensus package. It also happens to be a favorite of President Bush and White House officials, who are only too aware of the potential political impact of seeming to do nothing while gasoline prices soar.

In return for their hard work, Domenici and Burton, their aides, and Frist and Hastert, thought they should get some extra credit for bring the long-running negotiations to fruition, and the copies of the huge bill were circulated late Tuesday with the title "Domenici-Barton" on them.

A Senate Democratic aide scoffed at the idea that the Republicans decided to name the bill after two GOP lawmakers, considering all the work that Members from both sides of the aisle put into the legislation. "Even for a muggy D.C. summer, this a record for hot air," said the aide.

Pieces of legislation are often named after their sponsors, or named for retiring lawmakers. For instance, the Sarbanes-Oxley bill of 2002 — which forced corporations to tighten their accounting and business practices — was named after Sen. Paul Sarbanes (D-Md.) and Rep. Michael Oxley (R-Ohio).

Vanity also plays a part as well. Rep. Don Young (R-Alaska), chairman of the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, named the highway bill — officially the Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users, or TEA-LU — in honor of his wife, Lu Young.

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