

What's being bought in Boston?

By MEREDITH O'BRIEN

AS DEMOCRATS gather in Boston to officially nominate their presidential candidate, the focus won't solely be on Sen. John Kerry as he accepts that honor in his hometown.

The real power-brokering will take place at about 200 private parties held amid mahogany paneling, spectacular views of the Boston skyline and a sampling of fine cuisine. "Some of the best lobbying in the world is done at these conventions," former Democratic National Committee Chairman Donald Fowler told *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*.

While invitation-only soirees are not new to the convention scene, watchdog groups say this year's receptions will be more extravagant to make up for the absence of "soft money" contributions, now illegal under campaign finance regulations.

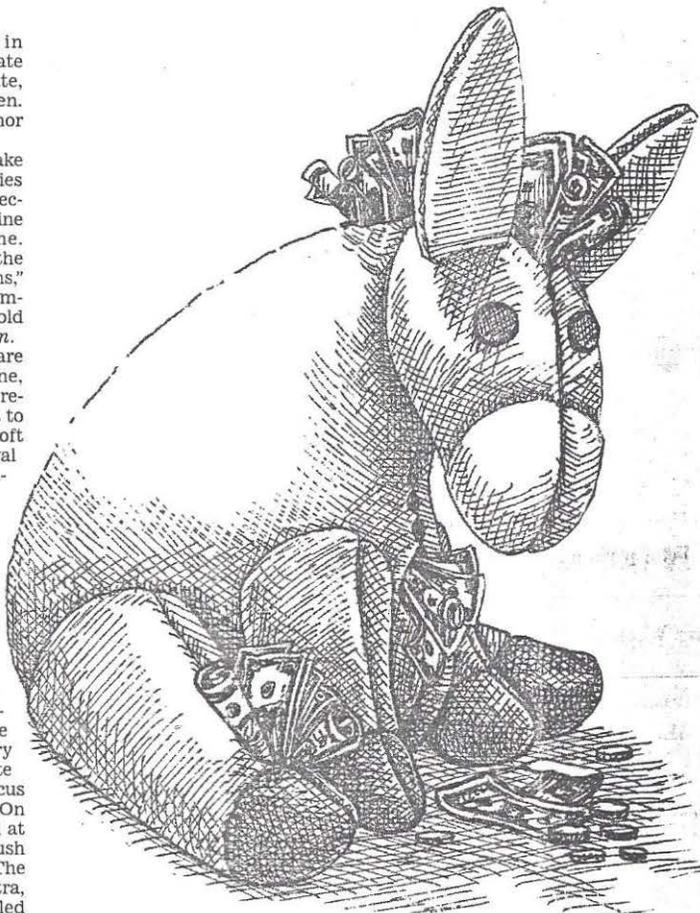
"This year, the number of private affairs is expected to far exceed previous conventions," reported *Broadcasting and Cable*, a trade publication. "Independent party planners will throw nearly 50 blowouts costing \$100,000 or more each, according to estimates."

However, these lavish convention events, paid for by special interests, seem inconsistent with the rhetoric espoused by Mr. Kerry and the Democrats, whose favorite attack lines on President Bush focus on his ties to special interests. On Mr. Kerry's Web site, one can find at least a half-dozen jabs at Mr. Bush and his links to interest groups. The DNC Web site echoes the mantra, prominently featuring a list titled "The Bush Record: Top Ten Shameless Special Interest Paybacks."

Yet many of those same special interests are planning elaborate parties for Democratic lawmakers and party officials during the Boston convention. Though there are parties held for the actual convention delegates — 31 of them sponsored by the host committee, at a total \$1.8 million price-tag — look for political schmoozing elsewhere.

Companies ranging from telecommunications and insurance giants to insurance, fuel, biotech and financial firms are ponying up thousands to fete those Democrats with influence.

"It's not an opportunity that we want to let slide by," an American Gas Association (AGA) spokeswoman told *The Boston Globe*. She added that the natural gas lobbyists have budgeted \$700,000 to stage



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parties at the Boston and New York national conventions this summer.

The AGA has several events slated for the Democratic convention week. They include a dinner honoring a ranking Democrat on the Senate Finance Committee, a late-night reception for the Congressional Hispanic Caucus at a hopping night club featuring the music of Los Lobos, luncheons in honor of two members of the Senate Energy and

Natural Resources Committee and a reception for governors, according to press accounts.

Two events are rivaling one another for the title of being the hottest event in town: the Creative Coalition's benefit gala at Louis Boston, home of the Asian/French fusion Restaurant L, and the gala for Massachusetts Sen. Edward M. Kennedy at Boston Symphony Hall.

The Creative Coalition — a group

of members of the arts and entertainment community — has the upper hand when it comes to Hollywood wattage, with celebrities such as Boston's own Ben Affleck, Oscar winner Chris Cooper, actor William Baldwin and actress/talk-show host Janeane Garofalo slated to attend the fund-raiser. It will be hosted by the Recording Industry Association of America, *Esquire*, Allied Domecq and Volkswagen. Alternative rockers the Red Hot Chili Peppers are scheduled to perform.

But when it comes to old-fashioned political clout, the party for Mr. Kennedy, featuring Yo-Yo Ma and the Boston Pops with conductor John Williams, is a strong competitor. The event, which is estimated to cost \$400,000 to \$600,000, is being sponsored by a handful of corporations and unions, including Raytheon, Bristol-Myers Squibb, the AFL-CIO and the International Brotherhood of Carpenters, all of which gave \$100,000 each, according to *The Boston Globe*. Mr. Kennedy sits on the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee.

Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York will be featured at a number of events during the convention, including an AIG insurance-sponsored lunch at Locke-Ober, a restaurant famed for its John F. Kennedy room and JFK lobster stew, reports the *Globe*. The restaurant, which boasts multiple fireplaces, crystal chandeliers and antique sconces, has appetizer menu items ranging from *escargots a la Bourguignonne* and scallops with garlic whipped purple potato bacala to spit-roasted Vermont quail and *Boudin Blanc*. Mrs. Clinton serves on the Senate Subcommittee on Aging. AIG's Web site boasts that it has one of the largest retirement service businesses in the country.

On the night Mr. Kerry declared victory in the New Hampshire Democratic primary, the senator told his raucous supporters: "I have a message for the influence peddlers, for the polluters, the HMOs, the big drug companies that get in the way, the big oil and the special interests who now call the White House their home. We're coming. You're going. And don't let the door hit you on the way out."

But when in Boston, don't forget to pass the lobster and free cocktails before you leave.

Meredith O'Brien authored a study on the Democratic National Convention for the Center for Public Integrity.