

Snyder Opposes Amendment

By Alison Vekshin

Stephens Washington Bureau

July 24, 2003

WASHINGTON — Almost two years after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, the idea that the U.S. Capitol building was a probable target still resonates with the lawmakers and aides who work there.

Of particular concern to Rep. Vic Snyder, D-Little Rock, and a handful of other lawmakers, is how the Congress would function if a large number of its members were killed or incapacitated in an attack.

The Arkansan on Wednesday joined Rep. Ron Paul, R-Texas, in opposing a constitutional amendment to temporarily appoint replacements of deceased lawmakers in the House of Representatives.

Snyder said he opposed placing anyone in office who was not elected. He also questioned the need for a constitutional amendment to ensure the continuity of government.

“The essence of democracy is the right of a free people to be governed by those who are elected,” Snyder said.

However, a Washington, D.C., commission in May recommended a constitutional amendment to ensure the government keeps running.

“A constitutional amendment is the most effective way to handle the problem,” said Kimberly Spears, assistant director of the Continuity of Government Commission, which released the report.

Although the 17th Amendment allows governors to appoint senators, there is no

plan in place to quickly replace representatives. When there is a House vacancy, states hold special elections which on average take four months, according to the commission report.

Snyder said an amendment is unnecessary and pointed to alternatives, including expediting special elections to select replacements.

The commission report determined that House special elections could go on for months, leaving the Congress without the minimum number of members needed to do business.

Meanwhile, Rep. James Sensenbrenner, R-Wis., House Judiciary Committee chairman, plans to introduce legislation Thursday calling for states to hold expedited special elections in “extraordinary circumstances.”

If the speaker of the House announces that more than 100 vacancies exist in the House, the political parties of states with vacancies would each nominate one candidate within 14 days to run in a special election held within 21 days.

Snyder called the bill a “starting point” and said he supported the idea.

“Twenty-one days to me seem to be unreasonable,” said John Fortier, the commission’s executive director. “I am skeptical that any state could hold a normal election in 21 days.”