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Capitol meeting rooms still free to nonprofits

On the Hill » Lobbyist rentals would make up the gap.

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Advocates for the poor, disabled and other nonprofit groups won't have to pay to use meeting space at most of the Utah Capitol, thanks in large part to rental fees a group of 20 lobbyists will pay for office space in the building.

The Capitol Preservation Board had been grappling for months with whether to begin charging for meeting space to help pay to maintain the building.

Various nonprofit groups were alarmed at the potential change. They have held strategy sessions and meetings at the Capitol and adjacent buildings for decades, and feared that a fee for rooms would strain their shoestring budgets.

But the solution to the problem became a lot easier when a group of 20 lobbyists, calling themselves the Capitol Hill Association, inquired about renting Capitol office space so they had someplace to make copies or send faxes.

The group agreed, under a contract approved by the board Wednesday, to pay \$38,000 in the coming year to rent space at the Capitol.

"When the lobbyists approached us, it actually helped us in resolving this thing," said David Hart, architect of the Capitol.

As a result, the preservation board voted to tentatively approve a plan to not charge for use of most of the meeting rooms at the building during the upcoming legislative session.

"I think they've come out with a fair solution," said Melissa Smith of the Community Action Partnership of Utah, an anti-poverty group.

The preference for some of the rooms at the Capitol complex will be given to groups that are having a meeting with food during the lunch hour. There will still be a fee for use of the auditorium in the State Office Building and the Capitol Board Room.

Hart said the rental fees for other rooms will also likely be dropped, because the fee now charged appears to be too high and discourages potential renters.

The space for the lobbyists will be in the basement near the east entrance. Hart said the \$18-per-square-foot charge is on par with the rate for office space in downtown Salt Lake City.

The lobbyists would have to be responsible for things like television, internet and phone service. To cover the expense, members of the association are paying \$2,000 a year in dues.

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