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## It's nearly Carnival time on the Potomac as Washington Mardi Gras awaits King Drew Brees

BY MARK BALLARD | Staff writer

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The "Louisiana Alive!" party was the most popular ticket at the 2023 edition of Washington Mardi Gras, which ended late on the night of Jan. 28, 2023 with an exclusive, black-tie ball.

Staff photo by Mark Ballard

**WASHINGTON** – Let's see, U.S. Rep. Garret Graves said as he thumbed through his phone: Shell Oil Co. and the Ports Association of Louisiana are throwing receptions Tuesday night.

Then Graves counted seven more events the next night at Washington Mardi Gras, which doesn't even start until Thursday morning, according to the Mystick Krewe of Louisianians' schedule.

Even as Graves spoke, state legislators back home in Baton Rouge were busy redrawing his district in a way that could make him unelectable. But that's a problem for another day. Next week, he and the rest of Louisiana's congressional delegation, along with hundreds of the state's top business, civic and political leaders, will be engulfed around the clock in Louisiana's uniquely big, brash moment in the nation's capital.

"Washington Mardi Gras is the single event that brings together our political community and business leaders," Graves said.

This will be the 75th Washington Mardi Gras since 1944. A few were skipped because of war and COVID.

The name is shorthand for what are really two contiguous events that share a common center of gravity: the Washington Hilton.

The official krewe focuses mostly on the standard fare for any Carnival celebration: costumes, royalty, debutantes, teas, lunches and a ball.

But around all the socializing, private companies, lobbyists, politicians, and trade associations have set up invitation-only cocktail parties and face-to-face meetings with regulators. There are so many events that no single clearinghouse lists them all: Arthur Hardy has yet to compile a Washington Mardi Gras Guide.

## A banner year



Drew Brees will reign as king of Washington Mardi Gras this year. The former Saints signal-caller has some experience as Carnival royalty: In 2010, he reigned as Bacchus.

BY DAVID GRUNFELD | DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

This year's event promises to be a big one for several reasons. Not only is it the 75th gathering, it boasts a true celebrity king: Drew Brees, the beloved retired quarterback for the New Orleans Saints.

For political junkies, there'll be plenty to talk about as well. Remarkably, Louisiana residents hold the top two leadership posts in the 435-member U.S. House – though there is intrigue around that. House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-Benton, is busy pushing a controversial border security package while trying to stave off a government shutdown – and to keep a restive right-wing flank from ousting him.

With all that going on, Johnson is unsure how active he will be in Mardi Gras festivities. Meanwhile, his No. 2, House Majority Leader Steve Scalise, R-Jefferson, is undergoing treatment for cancer and won't attend.

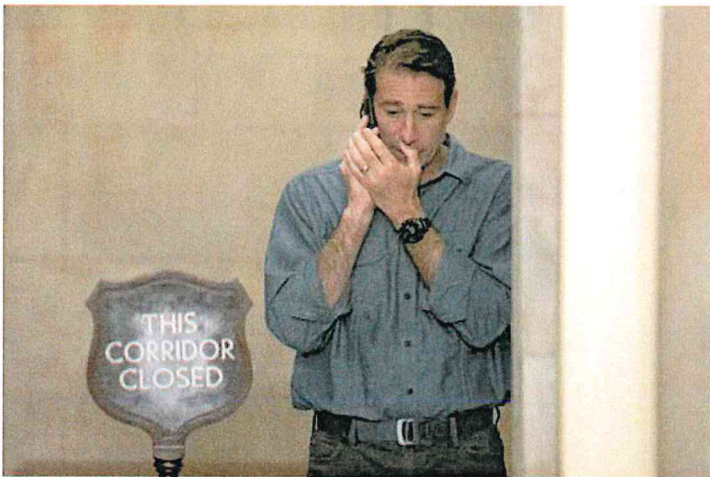
Graves, despite his challenges at home, will be giving tours of the U.S. Capitol to festival princesses, college student body presidents and others.



Speaker of the House Mike Johnson, R-Benton, meets with reporters at a Nov. 29, 2023 press conference in the U.S. Capitol.

AP Photo by J. Scott Applewhite

On Thursday, Graves and U.S. Rep. Troy Carter, D-New Orleans, will give a congressional update to GNO Inc., the city's leading business organization. Immediately afterward, White House Office of Management & Budget Director Shalanda Young, President Joe Biden's budget guru and a native of suburban Baton Rouge, will give a briefing on federal spending – the key conflict on Capitol Hill.



U.S. Rep. Garret Graves, R-Baton Rouge, talks on his cellphone as he stands in the entrance to the offices of the Speaker of the House on Capitol Hill, Wednesday, Oct. 4, 2023 in Washington.

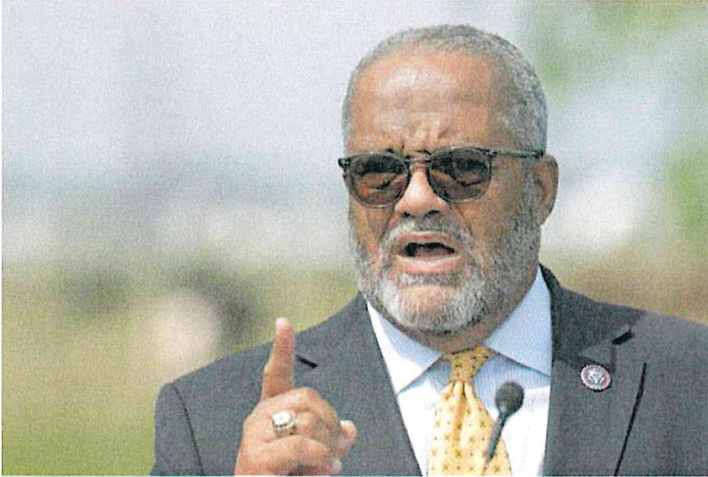
Associated Press Photo by Mark Schiefelbein

office, hasn't said if he is coming.

Last year, the top seven members in the gubernatorial line of succession were all in Washington, leading Lt. Gov. Billy Nungesser to quip that should an emergency arise in Louisiana, a lowly police juror could find himself in charge. This year, Nungesser can't make it. Gov. Jeff Landry, who has been flexing his power in his first weeks in

Where once Supreme Court justices, vice presidents and top-level officials attended the Saturday night ball, the event has morphed over the years into a more Louisiana-centric affair, in which carnival festivities are surrounded by something of an annual retreat on federal turf for state and local officials to hob knob with corporate and charity leaders, university presidents and economic development directors, lobbyists and trade associations.

Deals are not necessarily cut, but relationships develop that lead to business. Washington Mardi Gras is financed with ticket sales. The side affairs, some of them lavish, are funded by corporations and their lobbyists.



U.S. Rep. Troy Carter speaks in LaPlace on Thursday, April 6, 2023. (Photo by Brett Duke, NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune)

STAFF PHOTO BY BRETT DUKE

“Washington Mardi Gras is a party with a purpose,” Carter said. “While it recognizes our Louisiana culture and the history of Mardi Gras, it also teaches people about our state and allows our local government officials to get face time for discussions about funding, programs, and future federal opportunities.”

The University of Louisiana at Lafayette, for instance, is holding a reception that Victor McCreary, vice chair of president's National Science Board, is expected to attend. The school recently attained an elite rating for its research activities – programs that rely, in part, on federal grants, many of which are vetted by the National Science Board.

Baton Rouge Mayor Sharon Broome attends every year – not just for the celebration, but in order to foster relationships and review opportunities. “Such interactions are vital for our city’s growth and representation on a national level, making this event an integral part of our advocacy and outreach efforts,” she said.

Like many Louisiana mayors and parish presidents, Broome is hosting a hospitality suite, open Thursday to all comers.

## BYO boudin

Though Washington is an international capital city, with Latin, Asian, African and Eastern European grocery stores on almost every block, Louisiana ingredients are nearly impossible to find.

Butchers respond to a request for smoked tasso with a quizzical look, offering Polish kielbasa as an alternative to andouille. King cakes are nowhere to be found, and it costs \$56 to ship a \$29 king cake overnight to D.C. (A Graves staffer is dispatched to Louisiana every year to buy enough king cakes from 6th District bakeries to fill a U-Haul.)

Don's Specialty Meats in Scott is sending about 250 links of boudin for the Lafayette hospitality suite, which will be accepting guests on Friday and Saturday afternoon. But union, health and company rules require the Hilton to charge Lafayette \$2.50 per link in something akin to a corkage fee.

St. Tammany Parish Chamber of Commerce President Lacey Osborne says her group's involvement this year is an indication that the former bedroom community across Lake Pontchartrain has "grown up." The chamber is hosting a reception Thursday at the Jack Rose Dining Saloon, about a block or two from the Washington Hilton.

Michael Hecht, president of GNO Inc., says Washington Mardi Gras is the most "efficient" political event of the year. So much so that the organization is hosting a cocktail party Wednesday night on D.C.'s tony waterfront to educate its younger members on what the experience is all about, and how they can build relationships in a social setting that they can draw upon later, he said.

GNO Inc. is partnering with business consultant firms to sponsor the Thursday lunch briefing Young will address. Hecht also plans to appear on a panel discussing energy policy on Friday afternoon. He doesn't stay for the Saturday night ball and plans to return home Friday evening. Brees isn't the only royalty. The queen will be Baton Rouge's Camille Morrison, a Texas Christian University student who received a community service award. She is the daughter of developer Shane Morrison, whose companies own movie theaters and restaurants. One of his companies has a multi-state development agreement with Walk-On's, a popular sports bar and grill in which Brees is a partner. Walk-On's started in Baton Rouge, expanded into Lafayette and New Orleans, and now is building restaurants in other states.

Shane Morrison is politically active as well: He gave maximum donations to Republican gubernatorial candidates Stephen Waguespack and Landry, the eventual winner.

## **And pack a coat**

Sen. Bill Cassidy, R-Baton Rouge, noted that Louisiana officials can always visit his office. But during Washington Mardi Gras, everyone's offices have cleared their schedules of most everyday congressional business. Conflicting demands are set aside for the week allowing local officials to meet Cassidy and his staff as well as Sen. John N. Kennedy and his staff, then pop to other side of the Capitol campus and sit down with House members and their staffs. If local officials are looking to overcome a bureaucratic problem, "I can set them up with a relevant agency," Cassidy said.

He is hosting a tea for Morrison, the princesses and festival queens. Cassidy said he wants to use the event to inspire the young women to take up public service. To that end, Sen. Katie Britt, R-Alabama, will be the keynote speaker.

A former cheerleader, Britt went to law school, worked as a staffer on Capitol Hill and at 40 was elected to the U.S. Senate.

“While we may not agree on which college football team is the best,” Britt said, “Alabamians and Louisianians share many commonalities. Mardi Gras is always a fun reminder that brings us together. I enjoy working with members of Louisiana’s congressional delegation to advance important priorities for our states and nation, and I look forward to meeting some of their constituents.”

It could be a bit chillier than a typical Carnival season in the Bayou State.

Temperatures in Washington have been hovering in the teens and lower 20s. It snowed Monday, Thursday night and Friday morning. But daily highs are predicted to climb into the lower 50s by Thursday with the official start of Washington Mardi Gras – though rain showers are expected.

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