

Need a Florida getaway? Try Washington, D.C.



Though Florida House attracts some 10,000 visitors annually, it is a little-known treasure to most Floridians.

By Norm Wagy, Special to the Chronicle

Two short blocks east of the U.S. Capitol, one block behind the Library of Congress to the south and the Supreme Court to the north, Florida has its own “embassy” on Capitol Hill.

It’s called Florida House. No other state offers a similar facility to its visiting citizens.

It’s an oasis for the tourist whose legs and back ache from sightseeing. Better still, its staff is an excellent resource to recommend what to see and when to see it.

Where is my representative’s office? Can I meet my senators? Do we need to pay to tour the Capitol? How can we get seats in the balcony (Gallery) to watch the House and Senate in session? Can I attend a committee meeting?

Answers to these and many other questions are there for the asking.

Need a recommendation for a restaurant? The staff has menus from eating establishments on Capitol Hill, downtown Washington, Georgetown and the nearby suburbs in northern Virginia and Maryland.

Not happy with your hotel accommodations? Say the word and you will receive a list of hotels nearby and on the outskirts.

When should we go to the Supreme Court? What should we look for at the Library of Congress? (Take the elevator up a couple of floors and look down on the magnificent main reading room and don’t miss the Gutenberg Bible).

Florida House does not offer overnight accommodations or dining facilities. It’s a place to “take a load off.” Sit down, relax, have a free glass of orange juice. Make phone calls. Access the Internet. Read a paper. Leaf through a magazine. Ask questions. There is no

admission charge (though contributions are not frowned upon).

Rhea Chiles, wife of the late Lawton Chiles, a former senator and governor, conceived of Florida House in the 1960s when the Chiles family visited Washington and got lost on Embassy Row. One of the children suggested: "Let's go to the Florida Embassy."

An idea was born. The native of Coral Gables began spreading the idea for a state "embassy" among her friends, acquaintances and corporate executives in Florida. It caught on.

She discovered a Victorian-style row house built in 1891 near the Capitol. It was abandoned, in total disrepair and for sale. Using \$5,000 of her money, and with the help of generous donors, she purchased the house for \$125,000. She raised another \$100,000 to restore the mansion and, in 1973, its doors were opened to the public. To this day, not one dollar of government money has been spent to buy or maintain the house or provide its staff and services.

The house is available for catered receptions. Florida Gov. Charlie Crist held one there recently that was attended by most of the Florida Congressional delegation. (The staff has a list of approved caterers).

Bart Hudson, executive director of Florida House, says it's a pleasure to welcome Floridians visiting Washington.

"Our 'embassy' has been created by and for all the people of our state with the mission of providing educational and cultural experiences and a place to feel at home."

Rep. Ginny Brown-Waite, R-Brooksville, is an enthusiastic supporter.

"It is a wonderful institution serving visitors to our nation's capitol," she said. "Having attended many events there, I have seen firsthand the hospitality and warmth of our Florida House ambassadors. Florida House is truly a Washington, D.C. institution and something that every Floridian should visit if they are in the area."