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Q&A with Rep. Steve Scalise as he gears up for Washington Mardi Gras

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House Majority Leader Steve Scalise, R-Jefferson, speaks to an audience that attended the Washington D.C. Mardi Gras on Friday, Jan

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WASHINGTON — This week will be busy for House Majority Leader Steve Scalise.

On Capitol Hill, he's distributing king cakes and meeting with Louisiana dignitaries while shepherding through Congress the last of a dozen budget bills that need to be passed this month to avoid a partial federal government shutdown.

About 5 miles away, Scalise, R-Jefferson, also is chairing the 77th edition of the annual Washington Mardi Gras, which begins Wednesday and ends Feb. 1. The event features a formal ball and parties, breakfasts and dinners, speeches and hospitality suites in the Washington Hilton, along with dozens of other gatherings around the city.

Hundreds of Louisiana's leading executives from businesses, trade associations and charities descend on Washington each year to meet with local and national politicians.

"It's grown into such a large event, an amazing event, and a great celebration of Louisiana culture that combines with a lot of work to promote Louisiana's future," Scalise said in an interview. He grew up in

Metairie and lives in Jefferson. Scalise was elected to Congress in May 2008 and is now number two in House leadership behind Speaker Mike Johnson, R-Benton.

We asked Scalise about what Washington Mardi Gras means for him and other Louisiana leaders.

What kind of business gets done?

Scalise views the timing of Washington Mardi Gras as fortuitous because, as soon as the 12 spending bills pass, Congress turns to appropriations for the next fiscal year.

“A lot of these officials want to talk about some of the projects that are their most important priorities that need federal funding,” he said.

For example, he pointed to the recent passage of a bill that set aside \$137.5 million for construction and maintenance for the Morganza to the Gulf hurricane protection system in Terrebonne and Lafourche parishes.

“Those conversations happened during Washington Mardi Gras, where you’re meeting with not only parish presidents and local leaders, state reps, but you’re also meeting with the flood protection authority heads,” Scalise said. “We want to make sure we’re all on the same page so that I’m fighting for their top priorities when we have limited federal dollars.

“Those meetings are really important, especially at the beginning of an appropriations process, which usually coincides, coincidentally, with the beginning of Washington Mardi Gras,” he said.

Why does this work have to be done so far from home?

Scalise noted that no federal appropriation is decided by a single person at a single agency. Bringing together the various government and private participants at one time streamlines the effort.

Scalise: “We get a little policy over there, but it’s also a great, great sharing of our culture. I’ve got members of Congress, cabinet secretaries who I’ve brought to Washington Mardi Gras with me, and they are just blown away.

“It is not New Orleans Mardi Gras. It’s still something so different than what most people in Washington have ever seen before.

“You just got this great influx of leaders from the state of Louisiana to Washington. So, inevitably, a lot of other work gets done in between a lot of the formal events.”

How will your week kick off?

“I’ll start with a little reception in the Lincoln Room,” Scalise said.

When Abraham Lincoln represented southern Illinois from 1847 to 1849, he often sat by the fireplace in a small room just off Statuary Hall, where the House of Representatives sat at the time. Scalise led a bipartisan effort to restore the room for use by today's members of Congress.

Scalise: "You can't bring food in the House Chamber, but I've got that room right next door where we can do some good entertaining. We'll have New Orleans chicory coffee and some King Cake. And then we'll bring everybody onto the House floor."

"Like probably 8 years ago, I started doing almost like an open town hall meeting on the House floor. We get over 200 people that have come to that ...

“I’ll tell them a little bit about the history of the House, the Capitol, of course, but especially the House floor, and then just take questions. And it’s really a great experience for people that have never been to the Capitol ...

“They’ll always bring up the student body presidents. I’ll say, you know, let’s have our student body presidents stand up because they’re the future of our state. And you’ve got state legislators and business leaders.

“You want them to know how important it is to see this great elected institution, the House of Representatives, where we get our work done as they’re hopefully getting inspired to maybe get involved in government.”

What kind questions do they ask?

Scalise said one of the first questions usually is: “Where are the voting machines?”

Representatives have special cards that are inserted to count votes from locations around the chamber.

“What is the State of the Union like?' 'What is it like working with the president?' People are just curious.

“Some of it is asking about some of the hot-button issues of the day. But most of it is just curiosity about the institution ...

“While it might seem mundane some days, you’re just running around in between meetings, you’re going past buildings and rooms that so much history happened in.”

Where do you get your king cakes?

“I’ll go either Randazzo’s or Haydel’s or both,” Scalise said.

The two bakeries are in his 1st Congressional District, which includes a bit of Uptown New Orleans and the city’s suburbs, as well as parts of the bayou communities and the southeastern coastal parishes.

“We give away over 300 of them up here. They’re the most sought-after commodity up here in Washington when they come out, because it’s not like it’s something that’s here year-round.”

“And believe me, I have members, Republican and Democrat alike, who are already starting to ask me, ‘When are you giving out the king cakes?’

“Literally, I had the chairman of the House Budget Committee (U.S. Rep. Jodey Arrington, a Republican from the plains of west Texas) yesterday was like, ‘I can’t wait, I can’t wait.’”

Which event is the most fun?

We asked Scalise which of the major Washington Mardi Gras events is more fun: Thursday night's Louisiana Alive party that features live music and food prepared by chefs from home? Or the formal ball on Saturday night?

Scalise: "Saturday night is just special. Everybody's in black tie. It's a true, kind of a dress up, celebrating what's great about our culture in Louisiana when all the festival queens is paraded around."

"And then you've got the princesses and then you've got the king and the queen come out and then the floats and the whole krewe and everybody from the governor on down is going to be a part of that. It's a lot of fun."

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