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Opening arguments commence in Senate

By David Espo
 The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Bracing for opening arguments in his impeachment trial, President Clinton said Wednesday he will tend studiously to "the business of the people" while his fate is settled in historic Senate proceedings. House prosecutors said Monica Lewinsky had recently rejected their request for a voluntary interview.

With the first formal presentation of evidence set for Thursday, Judiciary Committee Republicans said they had sought permission earlier in the week to talk with the woman at the center of the sex-and-cover-up scandal. Her attorneys "declined to make her available," said a committee spokesman, Paul J. McNulty.

Legal sources, who spoke on condition of anonymity, disclosed that a similar request was made to at least one other potential witness, Kathleen Willey.

Apart from Clinton's remarks Wednesday, his legal team dispatched a formal trial brief to the Senate arguing that neither "fact or law" warranted his removal from office.

"The vote the American people rendered ... is hanging in the balance," the brief said in a reference to Clinton's election.

"They have their job to do in the Senate, and I have mine," the president told reporters in his first public utterance in three weeks on an issue that has tarnished his presidency for posterity. "I trust that the right thing will be done."

Clinton stands accused of perjury and obstruction of justice in the first presidential impeachment trial since Andrew Johnson was acquitted in 1868. A two-thirds vote of the Senate is required to convict him and remove him from office.

The trial is to resume at 10 a.m.

PST, with Chief Justice William Rehnquist presiding and the House impeachment team — Republican lawmakers all — starting to present their case.

The House does not yet have permission from the Senate to call witnesses in the trial. Spokesman McNulty explained the overture to Lewinsky by saying the committee was "duty bound to gather all relevant evidence and be thoroughly prepared for the trial. Implicit in the House's right to request witnesses is the responsibility to determine who the House will call."

One of Lewinsky's attorneys, Plato Cacheris, declined to respond to McNulty's comments.

McNulty declined to confirm the approach to Willey. She alleged Clinton made an uninvited sexual pass in the White House, but the incident is not cited in either of the two articles of impeachment approved by the House.

Separately, officials said Democrats had suggested canceling next Tuesday's scheduled trial session to avoid an awkward appearance on the day of Clinton's scheduled State of the Union address. Republicans discussed the issue at a closed-door meeting during the day. Most were opposed, according to sources familiar with the discussion, since Clinton had declined to reschedule his speech, but no final decision was made.

Clinton's legal team argued otherwise in their long legal brief filed with the Senate.

The allegations "do not begin to satisfy the stringent showing required by our Founding Fathers to remove a duly elected president from office, either as a matter of fact or law," they wrote. They even "fall far short of what a prudent prosecutor would require before presenting a case to a judge or jury," the brief said.

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