

WASHINGTON: Ladies, picture this: You search for weeks before finding the perfect gown for an inaugural ball. You're thrilled; its silhouette and color are exactly what you had imagined.

Then, on the night of the fete, you spot another woman wearing the same dress.

Oh, the horror!

A new Web site, <http://www.dressregistry.com>, hopes to limit these social nightmares by allowing you to "register" the gown you're wearing to a specific inaugural ball. It includes a place to detail the color, length, designer, neckline description and other distinguishing characteristics. You can even upload a photo.

The genius behind it?

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A man.

Andrew Jones got the idea after his wife traveled from their home in West Palm Beach, Florida, to New York City to buy a gown for a charity ball in their hometown — solely to avoid seeing the same dress at the event.

"I kind of put two and two together and I said, 'I think there's a way technology can help us here,'" said Jones, a 42-year-old automotive industry consultant.

The dress duplication problem has long caused anxiety among women.

Hollywood's A-list stars know their garb may end up on a magazine page — with a side-by-side comparison to someone who wore it better. Jones cited first lady Laura Bush's "Oh, no!" moment at the 2006 Kennedy Center Honors, when she was one of four women wearing the same red Oscar de la Renta gown. Bush quickly changed into something different.

"If it could happen to the first lady, it could happen to anyone," Jones said. "With the inauguration, it just all came together in my mind. I thought it would be a great time to roll it out."

At specialty stores in the Washington area, some thought the Web site a novel idea, but suggested it may not be foolproof.

"Nothing's exclusive anymore," said LaShea Green, couture buyer at Saks Jandel in Chevy Chase, Maryland, who had not yet heard of Jones' Web site. "I don't care how much you register, there's going to be someone (at an event) who didn't register."

So far, inaugural partygoers have registered about 100 gowns for more than two dozen official and unofficial events, including the Constitution Ball, the American Indian Inaugural Ball and the Green Inaugural Ball hosted by Al Gore. As the inaugural festivities near, the registries keep growing.

"I've had people self-registering their events every day," said Jones, adding that he's recorded some 300,000 hits and more than 10,000 unique visitors since the Web site launched Dec. 1.

"As the site gets more populated, we may be able to infer by what's being worn for each particular event, what people are leaning to," he said.

Registered dresses are mostly ankle length, many with plunging necklines. Labels range from an ankle-length blue dress by Banana Republic to a scoop-neck, to-the-floor ivory gown by Halston. Shades of purple, orange and red seem to outnumber the old classic, black.

Ken Downing, fashion director for Dallas-based Neiman Marcus, sees women bound for inaugural balls purchasing similar colorful hues from the chain of stores nationwide.

Downing said in an e-mail that there's no guarantee a woman won't see someone else wearing her gown. But he said Neiman Marcus' sales associates track who buys what gowns "to help avoid duplication on the evening of an event."

Some evening wear professionals in the Washington area also try to minimize a client's chance of embarrassment by not selling the same dress for the same occasion to anyone else.

"We say, 'Well, this has been bought already, so move on to something else,'" Green said.

Even if a woman spots her "twin" dress at an inaugural ball, she can handle it with poise.

"You go over," Green said, "and tell her she has wonderful taste."