

Miller makes the call

Senate president plans to retire at the end of his term

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ANNAPOLIS — Four more legislative sessions, and Maryland Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr. is ready to call it a career.

Miller, who has led the Senate since 1987, said this week that he would not seek re-election in 2010. Although it had been whispered around the State House that the 2006 race would be his last, Miller had kept quiet about his future. He decided to reveal his plans because his colleagues have already begun raising money for the 2010 election.

"I can't have a fundraiser and say I'm running for re-election. I'm not going to commit to running for re-election," said Miller, 63. "I can't ask somebody to give money when I know I'm not going to run again."

He plans to serve out his entire four-year term. Observers have often pondered whether Miller would resign so he could handpick his successor for his District 27 seat.

Now the talk begins on who his successor as Senate president will be.

"It is likely to be someone on the inside, who is now something like a chairman. This is a power position. They are looking for someone who could move things around," said Ronald W. Walters, government and politics professor at the University of Maryland, College Park.

"You've got to have contacts and run a body. If you haven't even been elected to a post, I don't think you can possibly have a chance," Walters said. "I think you'll get a sense of who the candidates are with their posturing and the things they support or don't support."

As Miller stands at the Senate rostrum in January, he will see faces of people who would consider themselves front-runners to take his job.

"One of the downsides to the story breaking is that this will be the talk of the next four years, and there will be a lot of posturing and things considered posturing," said Senate Finance Chairman Thomas McLain Middleton. "I'll try my best to not let

it affect my relationships with the Maryland State Senate."

Middleton (D-Dist. 28) of Waldorf has always been viewed as a favorite to succeed Miller. Like Miller, Middleton is a Southern Marylander with a centrist streak from a large family.

He sits in a powerful position as Finance chairman — a vantage that has him in the thick of issues ranging from health care to horseracing — which gives him a built-in fundraising advantage.

He represents an interesting blend: a former president of the Charles County commissioners, a farmer and a union supporter who championed the so-called Wal-Mart bill and an increase in the minimum wage.

Because of his Southern Maryland roots, senators may find Middleton a consensus choice to avoid the regionalism that could weigh down a candidate from Montgomery County or Baltimore city.

"I don't know if I'll have the opportunity [to be president] because there's another election between now and the next term. I'm not even focusing my attention on four years from now and how I can become president of the Senate," Middleton said.

But if he is re-elected in 2010, Middleton said, he would be interested in the presidency.

Another potential president is Senate Judicial Proceedings Chairman Brian E. Frosh (D-Dist. 16) of Bethesda.

Regarded as the environmental conscience of the Senate, he is a hero to the influential progressive wing of the Democratic Party.

Frosh, a lawyer, could tap into the growing political muscle — and deep pockets — of the Washington suburbs to build his case for the presidency.

"Sure, I am interested in the position, but as long as [Miller] is there, I'm for him. If you care about public policy, it's a great

place to shape public policy. Being president gives you an opportunity to have an impact," Frosh said.

How he would make that impact, well, that's a story for another day.

"I've got a slew of bills that I'm introducing this year, and if they pass, my agenda four years from now would be different," Frosh said.

A third candidate is Budget and Taxation Chairman Ulysses Currie (D-Dist. 25) of Forestville. Currie is arguably the most influential African-American leader in Prince George's County. He leads the "Committee of 10" African-American senators, and his candidacy could appeal to black leaders who have become increasingly restless about the lack of diversity in the party's top elected offices.

"I was honored that my name was mentioned by President Miller, who is a great leader," Currie said. "I think I'm going to stay focused on the work of chairing my committee because in order to be effective I've got to stay focused. [Miller] has not yet given it up. Four years is a long time in politics, so I would not want to anticipate what he is and is not going to do."

Although a finite number of days remain in his General Assembly tenure, Miller still has his sights on the Senate's future.

"I need people who are looking to move the Democratic Party forward," Miller said, naming Sen.-elect Jamin B. Raskin (D-Dist. 20) of Takoma Park.

"I'm impressed by his enthusiasm," he said.

He said he would still attend fundraisers and look for candidates who bring youth and wisdom to the chamber. He was dismissive of 2006 candidates who didn't take campaigning seriously.

Candidates have to enjoy politics, Miller said.

"If they're going to be here for any length of time, they're going to have to enjoy raising money," he said.