

Miller plans ambitious legislative agenda

GOP sees ploy to undermine Ehrlich re-election

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ANNAPOLIS — Election-year sessions of the General Assembly are usually 90 days of feel-good bills and political posturing.

But not next year.

With Democrats desperate to reclaim the governor's mansion, Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr. is promising a far more aggressive legislative agenda than he has pushed at any time in recent memory. His reputation is more political tactician than legislative mechanic.

Republicans see Miller's interest in policy as a ploy to marginalize Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. In some cases, they said, Democrats hope to pass unacceptable bills so Ehrlich will be forced to veto them.

The governor and his aides have had an extremely cordial relationship with the Democratic leader for the first three years of Ehrlich's term, but privately they have said they expect Miller (D-Calvert, St. Mary's) to go back to his Democratic base next year.

Miller said the legislature will address a wide range of issues, from electricity deregulation to juvenile justice reform.

On the plate, Miller vowed, will be the skyrocketing costs of home-heating and automobile fuel, premium hikes for health care in rural areas and several environmental bills—including a controversial plan to cut air pollutants from power plants.

All this will be on top of Miller's usual push for slot machine gambling, a well-funded campaign to spend state money on embryonic stem cell research and whatever recom-

work force.

"This is not the time to coast," Miller said in an interview Wednesday. "We have a responsibility to address the issues that our citizens are concerned about. We have to be proactive and be prepared to take on a lot of issues that are crying out for us to address."

In ticking off this laundry list, Miller said the issues are those that are not being addressed by Ehrlich.

"We have a very typical laissez-faire, hands-off administration," he said. "If the governor and his staff are not going to move forward on these issues, we're going to have to."

Senate Republicans, not surprisingly, are skeptical of Miller's motives.

"Since when is Mike Miller a policy wonk?" asked Senate Minority Leader J. Lowell Stoltzfus (R-Lower Eastern Shore). "Mike Miller is a political animal, and everything he does has to do with his political ambitions. He is a chameleon. He will change to whatever the political situation requires."

Stoltzfus said Miller is concentrating on issues that are marginal because of Ehrlich's success on key matters such as education, transportation and fiscal responsibility.

The Ehrlich administration has shepherded the state through rough fiscal times, provided record funding for education and kept its commitments on transportation such as moving forward with the long-

men d a - planned Intercounty Connector highway, Stoltzfus said.

"If you look at the big issues around the state, this governor has been extraordinarily successful," he said. "The fact is, the Democrats can't shine a candle to the governor's success in policy."

Sen. David R. Brinkley (R-Frederick) was not surprised to hear that Miller is planning an aggressive agenda for next year.

For more than three decades, Brinkley said, there was a Democratic governor and a Democrat-controlled General Assembly that did not want to make waves in an election year. That all changed when Ehrlich was elected in 2002.

"When you've had a monopoly of power, real issues are swept under the rug. The fourth year of a term is typically when everyone laid low and tried to dodge the bullets," Brinkley said. "It sounds like [Miller] wants to move forward with a very left-leaning agenda in an attempt to solidify the Democratic base going into an election year."

Indeed, Democrats in the Senate and House teamed up last year to pass several union-friendly bills such as increasing the minimum wage and requiring large corporations to pay for health care benefits. Ehrlich vetoed those bills, but the Democrats are planning to override them in January.

This year, Miller is also talking about issues that play well with core Democratic constituencies such as unionized teachers and environmental groups.

Without going into specifics, Miller said the Maryland State Teachers Association is going to make an aggressive push to improve the teachers' pensions.

Miller said he had been "embarrassed for Maryland" by a story in the June National Geographic magazine that detailed the decades-long struggle in

cleaning up the Chesapeake Bay.

He said the Agricultural Stewardship Commission, made up of House and Senate leaders and representatives from the agriculture industry, is going to produce a bill to address harmful runoff from farms into the bay. The nitrogen-rich runoff is responsible for the declining crabbing and oyster industries.

Miller also said that the so-called Four P's bill, which is intended to crack down on harmful emissions from power plants will get serious consideration next year. Two power plants in Miller's home turf of Southern Maryland are among the state's worst in pollution.

The measure failed last year in the face of intensive lobbying from industry interests.

"Pollution from power plants is a major problem that has to be addressed," Miller said.

Democrats credit Ehrlich for passing the "flush tax" that earmarks hundreds of millions of dollars for sewer treatment plant upgrades, but they see room for improvement.

"It won't hurt the Democrats to try and achieve some policy objectives, which are going to expose the lack of the governor's policy—especially on the environment," said Sen. Brian E. Frosh (D-Montgomery). "We can put a lot of things on the governor's desk to get some measure of accountability."

Senate Finance Chairman Thomas "Mac" Middleton (D-Charles), a key Miller lieutenant whose committee will handle many of these issues, said he has worked harder during this interim than ever before.

"The citizens want answers, and they want their elected leaders to be responsive," Middleton said. "We're going to have a very full agenda next year."

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