

# MILLER RAISES FUNDS, EYEBROWS

## Senate head says he'll retire in '10, but some in capital doubt it

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BY JENNIFER SKALKA  
(SUN REPORTER)

Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller has said he isn't running for re-election in 2010, but that pledge is meeting growing skepticism from colleagues as he gears up to host his second fundraiser in a month — a fete this week at his sprawling Chesapeake Beach home.

With Miller's latest push for cash, many in Annapolis are speculating that he is not simply restocking his campaign coffers to help Democrats in swing districts win tough contests in coming years. Miller, they say, could be using the latest fundraising drive to reassert his political dominance at

just the moment several of his colleagues are starting to work behind the scenes to launch efforts to succeed him as president.

"I think he is probably leaving his options open," said Sen. Verna L. Jones, a Baltimore Democrat who chairs the Legislative Black Caucus. "And regardless of the final decision, he will have the wherewithal to mount a strong campaign or to be able to support candidates."

Miller says that he meant it when he announced he would retire after this term and that he still means it.

But until then, he said, he intends to remain president of the Senate, and doing that job requires him to raise money for political campaigns. He said that addressing the state's projected \$1.5 billion budget shortfall next year is going to require Democrats to take tough votes on taxes and slot machine gambling — votes that could be

politically costly in swing districts, such as those in Anne Arundel and Baltimore counties.

"Our members are targeted constantly, and the monies... need to be used to defend Democratic members who are going to have to make tough votes to try to balance this budget and move the state forward in a progressive manner," Miller said.

Miller, 64, is a Calvert County Democrat who has led the Senate for two decades and is the longest-serving Senate president in the country. He said last year that this four-year term in the General Assembly would be his last. With that declaration, three powerful committee chairmen emerged as the front-runners to replace him as Senate president: Montgomery County Sen. Brian E. Frosh, Prince George's County Sen. Ulysses Currie, and Sen. Thomas M. Middleton of Charles County.

There are others who might be interested, and some say they would like to see a woman in the mix, but these men are viewed by senators to have the broadest potential support.

Frosh, Currie and Middleton represent three distinct political and geographic communities.

Frosh, chairman of the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee, was raised in left-leaning Montgomery County.

Currie, who grew up in segregated Whiteville, N.C., was the first in his family to go to college. He leads the powerful Budget and Taxation Committee. In any con-

test for Senate president, he could benefit from the support of the chamber's black senators, who number 10 of the 47 members.

Middleton is perhaps closest in personality to Miller — and at least politically, best represents the Miller model. He is a moderate from Southern Maryland. But where Miller is known to strong-arm members when necessary, Middleton is viewed as more amiable and easygoing.

Though the presidential hopefuls have expressed a firm interest in the job, in recent weeks they have deferred to Miller. Each has said he will not run if Miller decides he wants another term.

"If he runs again, I would support him," Currie said.

Middleton, entering Miller's \$1,000-a-ticket fundraiser at a Little Italy restaurant in May, was equally deferential. "I hope he's Senate president as long as I am a senator," Middleton said.

Frosh was firm in his desire to follow Miller but said he wouldn't run against him.

"He's a marquee fundraiser," Frosh said. "And whether he is running or not, this is money that will ultimately [be] to the benefit of Democrats, and primarily Democrats for state Senate."

But he added, "I still would like to succeed Mike Miller as president of the Senate, and I think being the best senator and the best committee chairman that I can be is the best way to get there."

The dynamics of any contest to replace Miller are hard to assess with three years to go in the term. There is no question, though, that

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the chamber's black senators, should they choose to unite behind a candidate, would be enormously influential.

"If a group of people decided to back an individual, that's powerful," Jones said.

Miller raised \$150,000 at Da Mimmo's last month, a spokeswoman said. He is expected to bring in at least as much Thursday at the \$500-a-head event at his house. Between 150 and 300 people are expected.

Miller told *The Sun* in April that he could run again if his constituents requested his services, and the fundraising events could be an indication of just such a bid. But Miller has always been adept at doling out dollars to help valued members in swing districts.

At the end of October, just a couple of weeks before the election, Miller had about \$695,000 in his campaign account. A month later he had less than \$100,000. He had given almost all of it away.

Melanie Miller, the Senate president's daughter and a communications manager for Comcast, said she has no sense yet of whether her father will retire. She said no one can raise money the way he can and that he takes it personally when "his senators lose."

"It's a family," she said of the Maryland Senate. "I can't see him without that part of his family."

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Sun reporter Andrew A. Green contributed to this article.