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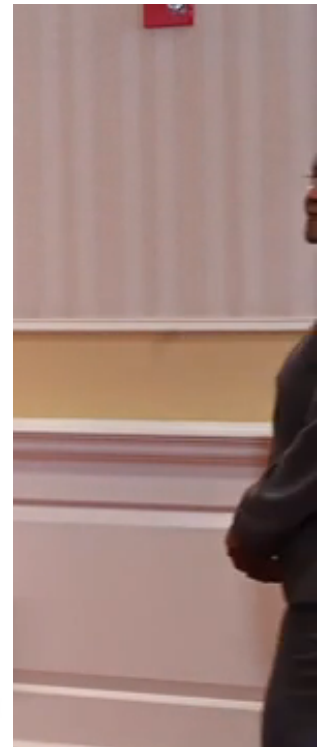
Miller says he'll step down as Maryland Senate president; Democrats pick Baltimore's Bill Ferguson to replace him

By PAMELA WOOD and LUKE BROADWATER
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FEEDBACK

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Longtime Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller announces in Annapolis he is stepping down from his post, to be replaced by Sen. Bill Ferguson.



Longtime Maryland Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller announced Thursday that he will relinquish his gavel and seat at the front of the historic Senate chamber, and a more liberal senator from Baltimore half his age was named as his successor.

After a closed-door meeting of Democratic senators, the powerful 76-year-old

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return to the role of senator representing parts of Prince George's, Calvert and Charles counties.

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"It's been a great run. I've enjoyed every minute of it," Miller told reporters, as he was flanked by dozens of senators. But he said it's now too difficult to keep up with the demands of being Senate president, a role he has held since 1987.

"My mind is strong, but my body is weak...," Miller said. "I suffer from anemia, I suffer from fatigue. This is a full-time job, it's a statewide job and we need somebody younger."



Miller stepping down Ferguson picked for Senate President

Longtime Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller announces in Annapolis he is stepping down from his post, and Democrats have selected Baltimore Sen. Bill Ferguson, third from left, to replace him. (Joshua McKerrow/Capital Gazette)

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Democratic senators decided unanimously in their caucus to recommend Baltimore Sen. Bill Ferguson, 36, to replace Miller, said Sen. Jim Rosapepe, the caucus chairman.

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Several senators tested a run for president behind the scenes in recent months, but Ferguson was the only candidate who stepped forward during Thursday's caucus meeting.

Miller will remain Senate president until the start of the next General Assembly session in January, and his term as senator runs for another three years. Ferguson will be the only candidate Democrats nominate; they hold a 32-15 advantage over Republicans. The Republicans are not expected to oppose the choice.

Miller said he will accept a position on "whatever committee they assign for me" and work to represent the needs of his constituents. Before he became Senate president, he served on the Judicial Proceedings Committee, a high-profile panel that reviews key issues such as criminal law, gun control and police reform.

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Miller said he'll focus on spending time in his district — he has a homecoming parade on his schedule this weekend — but also will fight to increase education spending, preserve the historic Preakness Stakes horse race in Baltimore and hold the line on taxes.

Ferguson's ascension would mark a massive and generational shift in Maryland politics. Miller, the longest-serving Senate president in Maryland, guided senators through momentous votes legalizing same-sex marriage, ending the death penalty and legalizing gambling. Miller said he's most proud of his work to modernize divorce laws and said his toughest challenge was "eight days and eight nights of hell" during a filibuster on a bill updating abortion laws in 1990.

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Miller [has been in treatment for metastatic prostate cancer](#) for more than a year, an illness that has [caused him back pain](#) and resulted in difficulty walking. He powered through the 2019 General Assembly session even as he underwent chemotherapy and other treatments. Miller often uses a cane, and at a memorial service Wednesday for the late U.S. Rep. Elijah Cummings, he spoke from near his seat rather than climb steps onstage.

In his tenure as Senate president, Miller influenced every major policy change in the state, including improving the health of the Chesapeake Bay and enacting some of the nation's strictest gun laws. Even when the General Assembly voted in 2012 to legalize same-sex marriage, which Miller did not support, he allowed the measure to come to the floor for a vote and worked to prevent a potential filibuster against the bill.

Baltimore County's Sen. Bobby Zirkin said it was tough seeing Miller make the decision to step back.

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"Mike has been a close friend for years and somebody who I just enjoy talking to, not about politics — about family or about sports or about law," said Zirkin, a Democrat who chairs the Judicial Proceedings Committee. "So, this is a very hard day."

Zirkin said he admires Miller's ability to listen to all sides of an issue, while not bowing to special interests that seek to pressure lawmakers to take more partisan positions.

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"Mike, for all these years, kept that at bay by making sure that everybody's voice was heard," Zirkin said.

Miller's decision to step down as president before his health got too bad shows his wisdom, said Joseph C. Bryce, a lobbyist who is Miller's former legislative assistant.

"In the 25 years I've been here, the happiest people I know are people who went out on their own terms," Bryce said. "To have the ability and the courage to do that speaks to how he's lead all this time."

Gov. Larry Hogan, a Republican, praised Miller in a statement, saying he has "immense respect" for him.

"President Miller has been a strong, unifying leader for the legislature and the state," Hogan said. "His steady presence and trademark humor will be deeply missed as president, but we are pleased to know that Mike will continue to represent the people of District 27 in the Senate."

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Hogan also placed a congratulatory phone call to Ferguson Thursday afternoon.

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Ferguson, who was elected to the Senate in 2010, acknowledged the challenge ahead of him.

"There is no one who can replace Mike Miller," Ferguson said.

Until earlier this year, Ferguson had the nickname of "Baby Senator" for being the youngest member of the body. Now, he stands to lead the entire Senate.

Going forward as Senate president, Ferguson will have a significant impact on a planned massive expansion of education funding and will be expected to continue to engage successfully with Hogan on the priorities of the Democratic-controlled legislature. Ferguson and Hogan have tangled on education before. When Hogan criticized the Kirwan Commission that has recommended increased funding for public schools as doing "half-baked" work this summer, Ferguson said he was furious.

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“It is difficult to convey the degree of anger and frustration that I felt,” said Ferguson, a member of the commission, at the time.

Democratic Mayor Bernard C. “Jack” Young said in a statement that Ferguson has been a “fervent advocate” for Baltimore.

“He will be a passionate advocate for our children, and a committed partner as we work together with his colleagues in the legislature to ensure that Kirwan is fully funded,” Young said.

The Senate president presides over floor sessions of the chamber, guiding legislation through the process, overseeing debate and calling final votes. The president also appoints senators to committees and leadership posts, and holds sway over which legislation gets serious consideration and which doesn’t.

Miller has taken pride in encouraging open debate with diverse voices — even if the conservatives in the minority rarely win the day. He often commends senators for the quality of their debates. He’s earned respect from members and leaders of both parties, despite political differences.

A state senator since 1975, Miller has held the role of Senate president since before all of the other current senators came into office and before one of them was even born.

Miller is currently the longest-serving state senate president in the nation, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. He has the longest uninterrupted tenure of any state legislative presiding officer.

House Speaker Adrienne A. Jones said in a statement that she will rely on Miller’s “counsel, guidance and friendship” as she heads into her first term as House speaker.

Jones said she plans to team with Ferguson on education issues.

“This will be an exciting year for both Senator Ferguson and I to lead our chambers to implement the Blueprint for Maryland’s Future and invest another \$2.2 billion in school construction,” Jones said in the statement.



State Sen. Bill Ferguson, 36, has been chosen by Maryland Senate Democrats as the next Senate president. (Algerina Perna / Baltimore Sun)

A former teacher in the Teach for America program, Ferguson said funding the recommendations of the Kirwan Commission, including increased funding for expanded prekindergarten, impoverished schools and teacher pay, will be a priority.

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“We have tough conversations ahead,” he said. “And with all of the members of the Senate, we will reach a compromise to ensure that all Marylanders have access to world-class schools.”

The process of leadership change in the Senate was calmer than when the House selected Jones to succeed Speaker Michael E. Busch, [who died in April](#). The campaign culminated in an hours-long, closed-door meeting in which the front-runners, Del. Maggie McIntosh and Del. Dereck Davis, stepped aside and supported

Jones as a compromise. Jones, who is African American, became the first leader of either chamber who is not a white man.

Senate Minority Leader J.B. Jennings noted he and Ferguson were elected the same year to the Senate.

“We have a very strong working relationship,” he said.

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Baltimore Sun research librarian Paul McCardell contributed to this article.

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Pamela Wood

The Baltimore Sun



Pamela Wood covers Maryland politics from The Baltimore Sun's State House bureau in Annapolis. She's been with The Baltimore Sun since 2013, and previously wrote for The Capital, the Maryland Gazette, the Daily Times (Salisbury) and Gannett News Service. She grew up in Howard County and graduated from the University of Maryland.



Luke Broadwater



Luke Broadwater is a former State House reporter. Previously, he covered Baltimore City Hall, police and courts for a decade. Luke's investigative reporting is responsible for some of the