

Smelser: Senator behind the scene

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By DEAN SCOTT

Staff Writer

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His office in the rear of the New Windsor State Bank seems bare — two chairs and a desk with a telephone and a few newspapers. Except for a small print of the Atlantic Coast and the state seal, there is little else here to distract listeners from hearing what Senator Charles H. Smelser has to say.

Smelser, the bank's president, was born in neighboring Uniontown. Sixty-eight years later, he represents it — along with other portions of Carroll, Frederick and Howard counties.

But right now he is talking about Patuxent Institution. Smelser and several other legislators toured the facility last week in response to the uproar over James M. Stavarakas, a convicted rapist who walked away from work release Nov. 28 and was subsequently charged with another rape.

Patuxent's Board of Review has since suspended all leave and work release programs.

"Now, normally we wouldn't discuss this," says the legislator as he

twists his glasses in his hands, "but it was so obvious that the Board of Review used poor judgment . . . the meetings confirmed that this man had tested positive for drugs — cocaine.

"Here was a man working his way out of the system and he chooses to do drugs and they knew it," he says, shaking his head.

"It's obvious they should have rescinded his work release."

In almost 30 years of work as a legislator since 1955 — he did not serve between 1963-1967 after losing his first try for the senate — Smelser has been known as the "tough" and powerful chairman of the capital budget subcommittee, and an expert on transportation and economic development.

Here in Carroll, he is credited for his behind-the-scenes influence in getting the approval of the Mt. Airy Elementary School almost three years ago. The funding had been denied by the state's Interagency on School Construction.

But behind-the-scenes or not, Smelser is not afraid of calling it as he sees it. While Patuxent officials have defended the Board of Review's decisions on the Stavarakas case, for example, Smelser is calling for the board's elimination.

"We will see how many others have had problems (at Patuxent)," he says, "but I'm certainly going to vote to do away with the board."

"So many of these inmates are involved in drugs, it's terrible," Smelser says. "It's a societal problem."

Smelser says the state legislators should have been checking on the institution over the years to see if

the board "was making good decisions or not.

"I think we never paid as full attention to this as we should have," he says.

The senator agrees with public safety secretary Bishop Robinson's recommendation that the board's power be shifted to the state Parole Commission which controls all other parole decisions. Patuxent has so far been the only prison with its own parole powers.

"This will be a very big issue in the legislature this year," Smelser says.

The senator says he has plans for only one bill for the upcoming session, designed to force all new electric utility plants to get a public service review before approval. The review sets rate figures for present electric plants but may not cover new coal-burning plants. The plants are planned for Cumberland and another for Frederick County.

A Virginia-based company — Applied Energy Services — wants to build the coal-burning plant in southern Frederick County to supply power to Montgomery County.

"I think if Montgomery needs it they should build it in their county," says Smelser. "I think both Frederick and Carroll can attract clean industries and that's what I'm working for."

The senator has also been listening to the discussions here in Carroll over changing the form of

county government, either by creating two additional commissioner seats or legislating a charter government for the county. Under a charter, the county could be headed by a single county executive with county council members.

The issue brought to a referendum by Commissioner Jeff Griffith four years ago but was soundly defeated. Griffith has raised the issue again this year.

"I don't hear all these complaints about the commissioner style except from the commissioners," Smelser says. "I get tired of hearing how they are supposed to work two days and can't or how additional commissioners would give them more time to work."

Smelser added that he is going to vote this year to remove the law that requires the commissioners to work a minimum of two days.

"Look, it's a public service job, it's never going to pay what private industries pay," says Smelser. "It's a problem of the commissioners and to think the legislature can fix it with a bill is ignoring the problem."

"There's nothing there that says you can't work more than two days."

Smelser added that he will seek a pay-raise over the commissioners' present salary of about \$22,000.