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HEADLINE: WERE THESE BILLS BROUGHT UP IN BARN?

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BODY:

The high and mighty travel to a humble stable to pay their respects. Three kings following a star to Bethlehem? Nope. Annapolis lobbyists following the money (or an issue or a cause) to state Sen. Thomas "Mac" Middleton's Waldorf farm.

This time of year, gift-bearing magi aren't the only ones hitting the road. Anybody who wants a little face time with Middleton - and that's a lot of people, because the session is about to start and he's chairman of the powerful Senate Finance Committee - must schlep to his Charles County barn.

Just as legislative business starts gearing up, it's crunch time on the day job for the guy who says he's the General Assembly's only full-time farmer. That's because this ex-tobacco grower makes most of his money these days selling Christmas trees and wreaths.

Luckily for all the lobbyists who want to bend his ear, Middletown can simultaneously hold up his end of a conversation and a Fraser fir. The lobbyists, in suits and wingtips, might look out of place in the wooden barn that Middleton built himself and heats with a potbellied stove. But the senator-farmer, jeans and T-shirt covered in pine needles, makes them feel right at home.

"It's almost like Mr. Smith Goes to Washington. He's dressed in work clothes, standing at a big table, making Christmas wreaths while he's talking about health care policy for the state of Maryland," said lobbyist D. Robert Enten. "We kept saying, 'Mr. Chairman, if this a bad time. ...' He said, 'No, I can work and talk at the same time.'"

Lobbyist Bill Pitcher led a delegation of six last week on behalf of the Retail Electric Supply Association. They came away impressed with the farmer's "huge hands" - and his grasp of one of Maryland's most complicated issues.

"He was just working away and talking electric dereg with the best of them," he said. "We got out in the parking lot and everybody had to shake their heads and smile and say, 'That was amazing.'"

Another recent visitor: Bruce Bereano.

"You go to where the power is," Bereano said. "The power is in that barn."

Middleton, 61, said he welcomes the annual pilgrimage to his 300-acre farm, which has been in his family since 1661.

Lobbyists have a bad name in some circles, but Middleton called them "one of the best sources" of information about issues and pending legislation. He also noted that lobbyists for nonprofits come to see him as well as those for big business.

"It's good for them to see me in my work environment," he said. "They see me as an average working man and not the chairman of the Senate Finance Committee."

Not the happiest Hallmark moment

In the middle of that last, mad dash for snow globes and "the very best" Christmas cards, the Hallmark store at Towson Town Center was shuttered Friday.

A store manager with the popularity of a pre-Epiphany Grinch inspired all but one clerk to pull a Johnny Paycheck ("Take This Job and Shove It"), other mall tenants tell me. The woman who answered the phone at Hallmark declined to comment but said the store would soon reopen.

Towson Town Center, which these days invites us to "shop early and shop late," fines stores that fail to open during mall hours, tenants say.

A woman I spoke with in the mall management office politely declined to comment on the Hallmark closing or any possible fines. But she abruptly hung up when I asked her name. Probably dashing off to spread Christmas cheer.

A most venerable Christmas party

Mildred Atkinson knows how to throw a good Christmas party. And she should. She's been at it since 1935.

What surely is Baltimore's oldest private party comes alive again today at Atkinson's Bolton Hill rowhouse.

"It should be my 71st, but it's my 69th this year," she said. "One year my husband died, and the other I was sick."

Back when the festivities began, Atkinson was a young mother of two. Today, she is a 97-year-old grandmother of eight, great-grandmother of 14, and great-great-grandmother of three.

In between, she spent decades as an advocate for improved housing conditions and integration, taking, by her count, 20,000 teachers, doctors and legislators on "slum tours."

Her good works - and her good party fixings - keep the crowds coming. Among the 110 who joined her last year: U.S. Sen. Paul Sarbanes.

It's looking like beef -- roast beef

I have it on deep, deep background that Martin O'Malley is close to making the most important pick of his administration. I mean, of course, the selection of his namesake sandwich at Annapolis' Chick and Ruth's Delly. A top-secret source says he wants roast beef with horseradish, provolone and lettuce. Hold the mayo for the fitness-conscious Gov-to-be. No word yet on the bread.

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GRAPHIC: PHOTO(S)

1. Sen. Thomas "Mac" Middleton is a full-time farmer in Charles County. 2. Will the governor-elect choose roast beef as his signature sandwich?

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