

State Sen. Stone seeks a change

Assignment: After being advised not to vote on a bill affecting asbestos lawsuits because he works for the Angelos law firm, the veteran legislator wants to move from the Judicial Proceedings committee.

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9.21.99

HIS MOTIVES WERE questioned and his judgment was criticized. Now, state Sen. Norman R. Stone Jr. has asked for a new Senate committee assignment.

You may recall the events that led to the request.

Legislation pending before the Judicial Proceedings Committee, in which Stone serves, would have allowed some victims of asbestos-related diseases to collect higher damages for pain and suffering.

Stone, a Democrat who represents a working-class Dundalk district that is home to many victims of asbestos-related diseases, has for years been among the General Assembly's most staunch advocates for such pro-plaintiff legislation.

But the legislature's ethics committee advised Stone not to vote on the bill because he is a lawyer in the firm of Peter G. Angelos, the leading plaintiffs' attorney in asbestos cases in Maryland. If the bill passed, Angelos' fees would stand to rise.

The committee's advice perplexed Stone, who figured his first duty was to his constituents, who he felt would generally want such a bill passed. Stone concluded he would vote on the measure, despite the ethics

committee's stand.

In the end, it was a moot question as Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller and Sen. Walter M. Baker, chairman of the committee, kept the bill from going to a vote in the panel.

Stone, the Senate's longest-serving member with 32 years, says he doesn't need the aggravation posed by such conflicts and has asked Miller to move him.

"I like the committee, but it puts me in a position I don't need to be in," Stone says.

His request also has a practical aspect. On the 11-member Judicial Proceedings Committee, tort bills are often approved or rejected by a single vote. If Stone has to abstain on those votes, such bills have almost no chance of passage in one of the Assembly's most conservative panels.

"Not voting is the same as a 'no' vote," Stone says. "You should at least allow someone on there who could vote one way or the other."

While Stone could have ignored the ethics committee's advice and voted on the bill last session, that will change after Oct. 1. Under the new ethics law, lawmakers will be prohibited from voting on bills that have a direct financial impact on their employer.

Miller says he has not made a decision about Stone's request.

He adds, however, that with only a half-dozen lawyers in the 47-member Senate, Stone's knowledge of complicated legal issues would be hard to replace on the Judicial Proceedings Committee.

Stone has turned down some of his supporters who were urging him to make a run against Rep. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. in next year's election.

"Maybe 10 years ago," Stone, 64, says of such a run.

But Del. Jacob J. Mohorovic Jr., a second-term Democrat also from Dundalk, is telling people he's interested in what would clearly be an uphill effort to oust Republican Ehrlich in the 2nd District.