

Bromwell moves musical chairs

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By BARRY RASCOVAR

TOM Bromwell's desire to forsake a promising political career for a high-salaried job and more time with his wife and family could profoundly impact politics in Baltimore County and in the Maryland State House.

If Mr. Bromwell becomes president and CEO of the Injured Workers' Insurance Fund, it will trigger a chain reaction in the state Senate, where Mr. Bromwell chairs the Senate Finance Committee.

But his departure from the political scene also will reverberate in Baltimore County, where the White Marsh Democrat wields considerable clout. It makes it more conceivable that a Republican could succeed Democratic County Executive C. A. Dutch Ruppertsberger in two years.

In many respects, Mr. Bromwell has evolved into a pivotal centrist in the politics of his home county and state government. He comes from a formerly blue-collar district that is rapidly urbanizing. And he comes out of a tradition of conservative Democratic politics that has moderated over the years.

Once known as a good ol' boy backbencher, Mr. Bromwell matured rapidly as Finance Committee chairman, mastering complex issues on banking, insurance, health care and racing. He gave the panel strong leadership, often standing up to the governor. And he steered the panel on a middle course that was neither overly pro-business nor pro-consumer.

That could change, depending on who replaces Mr. Bromwell.

Three senators are prominently mentioned.

One, Thomas M. "Mac" Middleton of Charles County, is a pragmatic moderate in the Bromwell mold. The other two, Christopher Van Hollen Jr. of Montgomery County and Gloria Lawlah of Prince George's County, are unrepentant liberals. They would give this important Senate committee a decided leftward tilt. That sends business interests shuddering.

The choice is Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller's. He's skilled at knowing how to keep his 46 senators happy, how to juggle

competing interests and retain a geopolitical balance in the jobs he hands out.

Mr. Bromwell's departure creates problems. If Mr. Miller wants to retain the Finance Committee's middle-road posture, he'll pick Mr. Middleton. That would also help the former Charles County commissioner in the 2002 election back home, where Democrats aren't assured of victory. Mr. Miller then could groom the affable Mr. Middleton as his eventual successor.

But Mr. Miller may have other objectives. For instance, Mr. Van Hollen wants to run for Congress some day. A Senate chairmanship would mean increased visibility.

At the same time, Ms. Lawlah is relentlessly seeking the top Finance Committee post. She has an ally in Major F. Riddick, the governor's fast-talking chief of staff, whom she is backing for Prince George's county executive. She is making the case that a black deserves a second chairmanship.

Mr. Van Hollen, though, can argue his home county of Montgomery — the state's largest subdivision — has been shortchanged in the Senate's power structure. That might prove a telling point.

Mr. Miller must consider what redistricting in 2002 will mean to his chances to remain Senate president. Montgomery will increase its Senate numbers dramatically. Picking Mr. Van Hollen could be recognition of this coming shift in Montgomery's voting strength.

But Ms. Lawlah is pressing Mr. Miller. She wants the job badly, though colleagues wonder if she can handle it. She's susceptible to the pleadings of certain lobbyists, has been a frequent ally of the governor and isn't knowledgeable about the issues handled by the Finance Committee.

So Mr. Miller's decision could dramatically alter the Senate's landscape. He might anger more people than he pleases, creating new tensions and rivalries. The Senate could end up passing more liberal legislation, too.

In Baltimore County, Mr. Bromwell's departure could weaken the Democrats' prospects for retaining the county executive's seat in the next election. He would have been their strongest candidate. Those expressing interest so far are viewed as lightweights or lacking a broad enough political base.

Republicans, though, could turn to former Councilman Douglas B. Riley, or even perhaps former state Sen. Francis X. Kelly. Either would give the GOP a decent shot at winning the county's top job.

Mr. Ruppertsberger could play a decisive role. He can't run for a third term and will likely campaign for governor. But he doesn't want to turn the county over to someone who's not up to the job.

Thus, he could throw his resources behind Circuit Court Judge James T. Smith Jr., a popular former councilman mulling a run for county executive. Or he could try to talk Mr. Bromwell into re-entering politics in 2002.

Or he might lean on his close friend, Mr. Kelly, who has done a bang-up job resurrecting the Community Colleges of Baltimore County. (Sure, Mr. Kelly is now a Republican, but Mr. Ruppertsberger has a history of forming alliances with Republicans.)

So a Bromwell resignation would reverberate in Towson as well as Annapolis, and not just now but for years to come.

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