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Stakes high if Miller, Bromwell do battle

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ON THE FAR end of state Sen. Thomas L. Bromwell's telephone line Tuesday came the familiar voice of the president of the Senate, Thomas V. Mike Miller. This would happen three times before the day was over, a record for off-season schmoozing. Except, along with the schmoozing, came an implied question: Tommy, we're not about to go to war, are we?

Forty-eight hours earlier, Bromwell, of eastern Baltimore County, was still expected to give up his Senate seat for a job worth maybe \$200,000 a year, heading the state's Injured Workers' Insurance Fund, a title so boring that it hurts to type it into the newspaper.

But now, instead of taking the insurance job, Bromwell had decided not only to keep his Senate seat but was reportedly looking hungrily at Miller's presidency. It said so in this newspaper, in Thomas W. Waldron's "Political Game" column. It happens, naturally, that Miller reads it. Thus, three calls to Bromwell in one day, a record.

Around here, the prospect of Bromwell going for the presidency of the Senate is not simply a matter of inside political baseball. This is about power, and money, and the Baltimore area's sense of itself and its stature in a state where the Washington suburbs see themselves as Maryland's big power player (when they deign to imagine themselves as part of Maryland at all).

Miller has his own record around here. Some remember, several years back, his off-the-cuff televised expletives (which he believed to be off-the-record) regarding the city of Baltimore. He called the city a (bleep) and a (bloop.) He happened, in some respects, to be right. But it didn't matter.

He said these things with a television camera running, and he was perceived as a bully picking on an underdog. If Baltimore was such a dump, why wasn't he doing something to help? Instead of using the slip to open an honest dialogue about urban problems, Miller complained about being sandbagged on television and then, as these things happen, the issue of the city's troubles slipped away.

This was too bad. Miller's not a bad guy, and he's not insensitive to Baltimore's problems. But, in those few seconds on television, he marked

himself as an intemperate outsider. It's a tough image to change. And it gets us back to Bromwell, and his thoughts about running for Miller's job.

This comes at a critical time. The D.C. suburbs have no love for Baltimore, and Miller's first love is the D.C. suburbs. And eastern Baltimore County, which Bromwell represents, has begun running into the same kind of problems that have troubled the city for the past few decades.

"I've heard it so many times," Bromwell was saying Tuesday evening. "'Baltimore County is maybe 15 years behind the city.' You hear it over and over. So, take a look at the last 15 years in the city. Don't we ever learn from that? If we don't get a handle on things, that's what we're looking at.

"And here's a guy, Miller, a good ol' boy from Clinton, Md., and how much does he know about problems around here?"

Take the recently rebuked Senate Bill 509. Baltimore County voters didn't. They shot it down, but good. But it doesn't mean they rejected the impulse behind it: to rejuvenate the Essex-Middle River area on the east side, and the Liberty Road corridor in the northwest.

"I won't say Mike's been terribly parochial about the Washington suburbs," Bromwell said. "But something like neighborhood deterioration in Baltimore County, it wouldn't occur to him. And he wouldn't have the same sense of urgency to do something about it. But the presiding officer should."

This is not a declaration of war on Bromwell's part. The two men have a collegial relationship, and have worked well together over the years. Bromwell said he hasn't made up his mind about challenging Miller. But he does talk about "Washington suburb power grabs," and "resentment" in the Washington suburbs of the Baltimore area's financial needs.

"I don't know if it's intentional," Bromwell said. "I don't know that they're anti-Baltimore just to be anti-Baltimore. But it's just the way things happen. Montgomery and Prince George's counties have done very well under [Gov. Parris N.] Glendening. There's an effort to maintain that.

"But I always think about [House Speaker Casper R. Taylor Jr.]. He talks about 'one Maryland.' I like that kind of thinking."

Bromwell was outwardly upset by some things Miller said when it looked as if Bromwell was leaving the Senate - and handing over his seat to his longtime aide, John R. Schneider.

Miller lobbied against it. He said Schneider might weaken the Democratic Party in the next election. Bromwell said Miller should mind his own business. He said others agreed, believing this was internal district business

and no concern of Miller's. Miller, as a Democratic leader, thought he was talking big-picture politics.

Bromwell said people have been calling him to urge a run for Miller's job.

"You can never go after the king unless you have the bullet," he said. "But a lot of people are trying to tell us something."

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