

Absent senator may face challenge

Dorman's surgery cost him 2 months

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ANNAPOLIS — For years, state Sen. Arthur Dorman has provided legislative updates to his constituents, usually by publishing a roundup of the salient issues in local newspapers.

Just last week, in a commentary in *The Laurel Gazette*, Dorman (D-Dist. 21) of Beltsville touched on the status of redistricting, school funding debates and legislation affecting teacher recruitment, health care, welfare reform and more.

The problem is: Dorman hasn't been at work in two months.

He has been home, recovering from back surgery, and it isn't clear whether he will return to Annapolis before the General Assembly adjourns April 8.

"He's coming along very well," said Del. Pauline H. Menes (D-Dist. 21) of College Park, a long-time colleague and ticket-mate. "He has felt well enough to come back. But the doctor feels he should be cautious with a back operation."

Dorman said he would visit his surgeon today.

"I hope I'll be there [in Annapolis] Monday, but it's up to my physician," he said. "I'm sorry I missed the session, but the pain was unbearable."

Dorman's colleagues expected him to return to Annapolis much

sooner. Several weeks ago, Senate Finance Committee Chairman Thomas L. Bromwell (D-Dist. 8) of Perry Hall announced on the Senate floor that Dorman, his vice chairman, "will be back very soon."

Colleagues say Dorman has been checking in with them for the past several weeks to keep tabs on the progress of specific legislation and funding battles. Sen. Paul G. Pinsky (D-Dist. 22) of University Park, chairman of the Prince George's County Senate delegation, said Dorman's absence has not contributed to the Prince George's senators' delay in addressing a bill that would shake up the management of the county school district, given the divisions within the delegation on the issue.

But even in a district that has enthusiastically sent the 75-year-old lawmaker to Annapolis every four years since 1965 — he joined the House then and was elected to the Senate nine years later — Dorman's prolonged absence may become a political issue.

That's because Del. John A. Giannetti Jr. (D-Dist. 13B) of Laurel, who has been redistricted into District 21, says he is "leaning toward running" for the Senate in September's Democratic primary. Previously, Giannetti had been planning to challenge the three incumbent delegates — Menes, Barbara A. Frush (D) of Calverton and Brian R. Moe (D) of West Laurel — who are expected to run on a ticket with Dorman.

A Dorman-Giannetti race would be a study in contrasts. Giannetti, who is completing his first term in the House, is 37.

"I don't want to run against Art," Giannetti said. "I don't want to run against those delegates. But this is my district. Art has given a lot of time to the district. He has performed very admirably. But it's time, I think, to pass the torch."

Dorman says he is running for re-election, and Menes said she

believes he will do fine on the campaign trail.

"Once the doctor says he's OK, there shouldn't be any limitations," she said.

John P. McDonough, a lawyer in Calverton who is close to the incumbent Prince George's senators, said political insiders are counting on Dorman running until they hear otherwise.

"Any time you're dealing with an incumbent that's 76, you get questions about whether he's going to run," he said.

McDonough said, however, Dorman's health should not be an issue.

"Anyone could have surgery," he said.

Former Del. James C. Rosapepe is known to be interested in running for the Senate if Dorman retires. But Rosapepe, former U.S. ambassador to Romania, said Thursday that he is making no plans to run and would help the District 21 incumbents.

"My feeling is Art's recovering very well, plans to run for re-election, and is going to win," he said.

The newly drawn 21st District, which takes in Beltsville, Calverton, portions of Laurel and College Park and a piece of Howard County outside Laurel, has 30 precincts. Sixteen are in the present District 21; six are in Giannetti's district; and the remaining ones are new to all the lawmakers.

Giannetti said he has been meeting once or twice a week with a core group of supporters and plans to begin knocking on doors as soon as the legislative session ends.

"If there's no longer an incumbent senator, that makes it a whole different race," he said.