

# Maryland General Assembly Senate panel savors role as bill slayer

BY KRISSAH WILLIAMS

Capital News Service

Sen. Walter M. Baker sat silently through the discussion of a bill giving repeat felons the right to vote. Then, in one swift move he picked up his microphone and stood up.

"What's this country coming to? Every time I turn around there is a bill on this floor talking about criminals," said Baker, a powerful Cecil County lawmaker. "Earlier we passed a bill that says you've got to hire these bums. ... How much further to the left are we going to go?"

He sat down and an hour-long debate ensued.

Baker, 75, is known in the State House for his candid statements and direct style. A senator since 1979 and judiciary chairman for 15 years, he is a foe to criminals, a supporter of the death penalty and a protector of lawful gun owners. He is a powerful senator with a "big drawer" where he leaves unappealing legislation to die.

Baker's committee reviews and kills more bills than any other. It was an unusual session recently when the committee voted on more than 30 local bills and killed only one.

"It's going to get harder," Baker told his committee. "I cherry-picked these for you."

Bill sponsors sometimes dread sending bills to Baker's committee because of his efficiency in killing them. But committee member Sen. Timothy R. Ferguson, R-Fredrick, said it is necessary to vote down the bills because Judicial Proceedings is sent more bills than any other committee.

"We get the lion's share of the bills," Ferguson said. "We have to kill a lot of bills."

In sessions past, Baker's panel has killed legislation tightening gun laws and extending the state's death penalty moratorium by refusing to schedule a vote or by filibuster on the Senate floor.

This year, Baker did schedule votes on the most controversial issues before his committee. They heard bills to create additional gun laws and a tougher standard for administering the death penalty in capital cases.

The unanimity didn't last long: The committee killed the bills only minutes after the hearing.

Sen. Brian E. Frosh, D-Montgomery, a sponsor of both bills, said he was disappointed, but not deterred. He plans to bring the issues back before the General Assembly.

"It's not totally unexpected given the makeup of the committee," Frosh said. "Everybody knows the committee is conservative leaning."

Gun rights' lobbyists have called Baker their "strongest defender" in Annapolis and this year the chairman said no gun bills would make it through his committee.

The committee went along with Baker to avoid a divisive floor debate, said Sen. Jenie M. Forehand, D-Montgomery.

"It would have taken days and that you really don't have toward the end of session," Forehand said.

The gun control bill Frosh sponsored would have required gun owners to obtain licenses similar to driver's licenses. But Baker said criminals, not lawful gun owners, should be targeted.

"What we need to do is increase the penalty for the misuse of guns," Baker said. "We should not penalize gun owners. An automobile is just as deadly as a gun."

Frosh's other controversial bill would have raised the standard for the administration of the death penalty. If passed, it would also have reversed convictions of the 13 death row inmates. Baker, a death penalty supporter, said he could not have allowed that.

"Some of the murders they committed were very heinous," Baker said. "Any person that could do something like that, I don't know how they could do it."

Baker had little patience during the bill's hearing. He asked Frosh to make his statements short. When Frosh went over Baker's time limit, the chairman cut the testimony of all subsequent proponents, including state Attorney General Joseph Curran, to one minute.

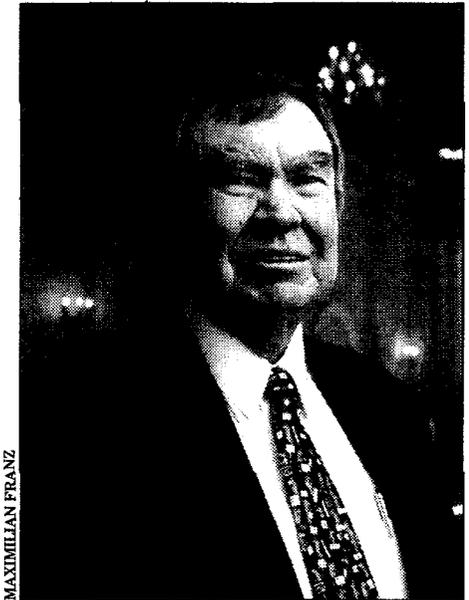
Hearings in Baker's committee are often abbreviated with time limits and peppered with anecdotes. At a hearing about fire truck regulations, Baker said he belonged to a fire company as a young man.

"We lived so far out I could barely hear the bell ring," Baker said, laughing. "By the time I got there all I could do was wash the truck off."

His stories are a shift from the harsher tone Baker can take on issues. He was one of only two senators to vote against so-called safe haven legislation, which allows overwhelmed mothers to legally abandon their babies.

"It's a stupid bill," said Baker.

Political pressure from lawmakers eager to pass safe haven legislation pushed it



MAXIMILIAN FRANZ

The Senate committee headed by Sen. Walter M. Baker, D-Cecil, kills more bills than any other in the General Assembly. Proposed legislation that Baker, 75, finds unappealing goes to languish in his self-described "big drawer."

out of committee, over Baker's protests, Ferguson said.

"It's an election year," Ferguson said. "People have got to go home and talk about it."

The legislation made it through the Senate in a much narrower form than the bill passed by the House. The House bill would allow mothers to anonymously abandon their newborns with any responsible person. The Senate version would only allow mothers to leave the infant at a hospital.