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SALISBURY -- Republican legislators have regained control of the Eastern Shore following Tuesday's elections, and they are optimistic about what it could mean as they prepare for the legislative session in January.

Nine of the 13 Eastern Shore legislators are now Republicans. With Gov.-elect Robert Ehrlich taking control, cabinet positions once dominated by Democrats could soon be occupied by Republicans.

"We gained eight seats in the House and another in the Senate," said Senate minority leader J. Lowell Stoltzfus, R-38th-Somerset. "It's a new era, and I, for one, am excited to be a part of it."

Not since Spiro Agnew was Maryland's governor from 1966 to 1969 has there been a Republican at the helm. But with Ehrlich's defeat of Lt. Gov. Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, Republicans sense a sea of change.

At least two Republican senators on the Eastern Shore have been approached for cabinet positions -- secretary of the Department of Agriculture or the Department of Natural Resources.

But Stoltzfus said Friday he will not leave his Senate seat for a cabinet post.

"I'm not going to accept any position," he said. "I think I can do more where I am."

With a Republican governor, Stoltzfus said serving as Senate minority leader and being on the budget committee could be an enviable position.

"I considered taking the job," he said. "I've served on the oyster roundtable, a number of DNR task forces and I'm fairly versed in Chesapeake Bay issues. And it was an intriguing opportunity for me, but unless Bob comes to me and says I have to go, I'm not going."

Sen. Richard Colburn, R-37th-Dorchester, said Friday he couldn't deny rumors that he had been approached about the DNR post.

"I have to say I am interested in the position," he said. "It would obviously be a great opportunity, but it's way too early to tell what's going to happen."

Ehrlich's office said Friday it would be at least another week before cabinet members would be announced.

Whether an Eastern Shore legislator is named to a cabinet position or not, Republicans east of the Chesapeake are taking comfort knowing the new governor will bring change.

"We have an excellent opportunity here on the Eastern Shore," Stoltzfus said. "From issues relative to the agriculture and watermen industries to concerns for the economic base, it has been stated that there are going to be changes."

Stoltzfus also said Eastern Shore legislators are relieved.

"We've got someone sensitive about our issues now," he said. "Too often in the past Republicans have been burned and ignored. They'd just thumb their noses at the rural areas because we didn't support them. It's time to establish a good government, forget about partisanship and focus on what's best for Maryland."

Colburn said Ehrlich won't be as partisan as Gov. Parris N. Glendening.

"I think we'll have a good mix in the cabinet," he said. "I mean, I believe Glendening was the most partisan governor Maryland ever had."

When Colburn first ran for office in 1978, he said there were four Democrats for every Republican. Now, he said the ratio is 1.4 to 1, with the vast majority of Eastern Shore Democrats voting more conservatively than in the past.

The new administration could open more funding for transportation projects like the dualization of Route 404 and Route 113, Colburn said.

"I think we'll have much better input with a Republican governor," he said. "On the other hand, the fiscal state of Maryland is bleak. We've got \$30 billion of unmet transportation needs over the next 20 years with a \$1.7 billion deficit projected over the next two years, so Maryland's new governor will have some difficult choices to make. It's going to be a different world, something to really look forward to. It will be much more enjoyable as a Republican legislator in Annapolis than it has been in my lifetime."

Democrats like Del. Bennett Bozman, D-38B-Worcester, are expecting Ehrlich to submit a much smaller and more conservative budget, but still opt to fund projects and programs dismissed by Glendening's administration.

"They're going to have their favorites," he said. "But, I think Ehrlich is going to be reasonable."

Bozman said Republicans may outnumber Democrats on the Eastern Shore, but not the Lower Shore counties, where he and Del. Norman Conway, D-38B-Wicomico, still make up the majority.

"I think Ehrlich is a person who wants to do something," he said. "He doesn't want to leave office without any accomplishments and I look for him to work with Democrats along the way."

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