

Currie's first task in new role a messy — and costly — one

*New Budget chief
faces \$1.8B deficit*

by **Walter Lee Dozier**

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LANDOVER — Just days after being named chairman of the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee in early November, Ulysses Currie was going through hundreds of pages of state budget materials.

The third-term senator couldn't take time to celebrate with the legislative session — and a host of tough budget decisions — less than two months away.

Currie (D-Dist. 25) of Forestville knows he will be under scrutiny from his Senate colleagues as well as the media as the state grappled with a projected \$1.8 billion budget deficit.

He is also the first African American from Prince George's County to chair a Senate standing committee. He replaces Barbara A. Hoffman of Baltimore, who lost her Senate seat in September's Democratic primary.

"It's a great feeling," said Currie, who has served in the Senate

since 1995 following two terms as a delegate. He has been a member of the budget committee since being elected to the Senate.

"He knows budget," said Sen. Nathaniel Exum (D-Dist. 24) of Capitol Heights. "He knows the subject matter because he also served on the House Appropriations Committee when he was a delegate. His knowledge will serve him well."

Del. Carolyn J.B. Howard (D-Dist. 24) of Mitchellville, a friend and fellow educator, said Currie will make an outstanding committee chairman because of his strong interpersonal skills.

"He was an outstanding middle school principal," said Howard of Currie, a 22-year veteran in education. "He's well-liked and he knows how to get along with people."

Critics complain that Currie has been slow to take positions on some critical and controversial issues, but Howard and other supporters say that leadership style creates opportunities for compromise.

"In the long run he is benefiting from that compromise because he knows how to listen to people, and people are more willing to listen to him," Howard said. "He makes people think he's giving in, but he's in control at all times."

The Budget and Taxation Committee plays a crucial role in deciding what programs and projects get priority in state funding, and the committee chair has a decided influence in those decisions.

During his campaign, Governor-elect Robert Ehrlich Jr. (R) promised that Prince George's County would receive full funding for public school education. Some of Currie's colleagues are hoping he will help make that happen.

"I will remind the governor of that promise as we go through the budget process," Currie said. "I think we will fully fund the school system, but we will have to make cuts in other places."

"Right now, we are spending more money than we are bringing in. We either have to cut spending or increase revenues or a combination of both."