

Baker calls for unity

By KRISTEN KLUCK

Journal staff writer

To Del. Rushern L. Baker III the Prince George's County House delegation is a family and should fight like a family — behind closed doors.

But in public it should be a unit, he says.

The Prince George's delegation has achieved some victories, like more school funding for impoverished students and a four-year \$140 million commitment to school construction this year. But it also has been marred by a penchant for infighting, some say to the detriment of the county.

Baker, 40, the newly elected chairman, says he wants to bring the delegation together.

"When you are in Annapolis, you may see us fighting in delegation," Baker told the 20 delegation members after they elected him chairman two weeks ago. "But when we get out on the floor, we are a family. This is our home and we have to fight for it."

"We have the most diverse, intelligent delegation in Annapolis," Baker said during a recent interview. But, in terms of what the delegation brings home, "We need to do better, and I think we can. We have the team, it needs to be coordinated. ... We have got to elevate the game."

That means opening lines of communication between all elected bodies representing the county, said Baker, who was just elected to serve his second term representing District 22B, a small area including Landover Hills, parts of Bladensburg and Cheverly.

"I couldn't agree more with that philosophy," said County Council member M.H. Jim Estepp, D-9th-Upper Marlboro. "If Prince George's County is going to secure the resources it needs from a state reluctant to give it to a jurisdiction that's put [tax cap] restraints on itself, we're going to need all the diplomacy we can get."

"I welcome it and look forward to working in that kind of environment," said school board Chairman Alvin Thornton, District 7. Working together "is the only way the county

RUSHERN L. BAKER III

Here's some information on the new chairman of the county's delegation in the state House of Delegates.

AGE: 40

MARITAL STATUS: Married, with three children

RESIDENCE: Cheverly

PARTY: Democrat

EMPLOYMENT: Attorney for People's Involvement Corp., a nonprofit community development and social services organization.

Former contract specialist and equal employment opportunity officer for the District of Columbia Department of Housing and Community Development.

can be the most competitive for state resources and it's the best atmosphere to guarantee accountability for all levels of government."

The approach is used successfully by other jurisdictions such as Baltimore city, but may be a daunting task here considering the parochialism and divisiveness that mark Prince George's politics.

There was the the battle last year between County Executive Wayne K. Curry and state Sen. Gloria Lalah, D-26th-Hillcrest Heights, not over the amount of money the county would receive for school construction, but over the funding formula to be applied to it.

And squabbles continue between the County Council and school board over how the board spends county money.

And there were the lines drawn during the recent gubernatorial campaign when Curry held back his endorsement until a few weeks before the election. Gov. Parris N. Glendening has since made it clear Curry is not in his graces.

For Baker to accomplish his goal, he will have to find a way to bridge those gaps.

"Rushern's task is to bring us together as a delegation but with the insight and the help of the county executive and the chair of the County Council. Then we can move forward," said Del. James W. Hubbard, D-23rd-Bowie. "If we are not working together, people will be working against us. ... We were torn apart down there last year" during the school funding debate.

"It's going to be a tough job," Hubbard said. "I think he's up to the task. I also think he has good friends who will help him out."

Baker appointed the delegation's vice chairwoman — Del. Barbara Frush, D-21st-College Park — to be liaison between the House, Curry, council and school board.

He plans regular delegation meetings with the county leadership. He wants to work with the school board and superintendent to develop innovative programs to help draw in more money and strengthen the system.

"There have been some contentious times for the Prince George's delegation; I think everyone's aware of that," said Frush, who like Baker is beginning her second term. "But it's time we pull together."

"It's going to be a difficult session. The county executive is somewhat at odds with the governor, so we're going to have to act as the mediator. We're going to have to be more of the county's voice in Annapolis," Frush said. "Hopefully we can work with the county executive and do what needs to be done for the benefit of our people."

Sen. Paul G. Pinsky, D-22nd-Cheverly, said he has supported Baker since he won his seat in 1994, and believed Baker could overcome the political challenges facing Prince George's.

"He wants to expand and extend school funding. I think he'll do that and I think the governor will be receptive to that," Pinsky said.

"He is an extremely honest individual with a lot of integrity. He will bring the delegation together. ... I don't think they could have a more articulate spokesperson," he said.

Baker served as vice chairman of the delegation's bicounty committee and sits on the House Judiciary Committee.

He is a lawyer for People's Involvement Corp., a nonprofit community development and social services organization, and a captain in the U.S. Army Reserve Judge Advocate General Corps.

Born in Georgia, Baker lived up and down the East Coast because of his father's military career. Baker moved to Washington to attend Howard University, where he earned his bachelor's and law degrees. He lives in Cheverly with his wife and three children.