

Baker is P.G. politician to watch

6-year delegate seen
as executive material

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UPPER MARLBORO —
Move up or move out.

Seven Prince George's County Council members and Executive Wayne K. Curry are trying to map their political futures after 2002, when a local term-limit law will force them from office.

Curry, with \$281,455 in campaign contributions, has said neither what his next step might be nor who he would like to see fill his job. As a result, that wide-open space is being filled with

whispers about who is running for executive in the state's second-most populous jurisdiction.

"Everyone seems to be feeling their Cheerios," says former state Sen. Tommie Broadwater Jr. "Everybody's got a shot at it."

But the politician everyone is watching is Del. Rushern L. Baker III, a Democrat from Cheverly who is entering his sixth year in the House and his second year as delegation chairman.

His leadership last year on Prince George's education reform and the potential to do the same this year will place him squarely in the spotlight. He also could help secure state money for access roads to National Harbor, the \$560 million hotel-entertainment complex on the Potomac River.

"Rushern's had a meteoric rise," says Del. Michael E. Busch, an Anne Arundel Democrat who has been a House member since 1987 and is chairman of the Economic Matters Committee. "He's bright, articulate and fair. The sky's the limit for Rushern,

He can be anything he wants to be."

This month, a \$250-a-ticket fund-raiser in Greenbelt attracted about 200 people, including House Speaker Casper R. Taylor Jr., who calls the 41-year-old Baker "a whiz kid."

Leading the county's 21-member House delegation has been likened to trying to herd kittens. Constituent demands pull delegates in different directions: black and white, rich and poor, urban and tobacco-field rural.

Delegates also feel pressure to raise the performance of the county schools, which have the second-worst test scores in Maryland, and to secure state aid to offset the effects of a local tax limit.

"Rushern has brought discipline to a large, diverse delegation from a county with lots of systemic problems," says Taylor. "I think he realizes very well that the only way you cope with those kinds of circumstances is with discipline."

Baker needed all of his skills last session, when Baltimore Del. Howard P. Rawlings threatened to push for a state takeover of Prince George's schools.

Baker responded with a bill that forced the school board to work with a management oversight panel on school reform and ultimately pushed out Superintendent Jerome Clark, who was replaced by Iris Metts, Delaware's former secretary of education.

"The school board threw a fit," says Del. Barbara Frush, a Calverton Democrat. "The PTAs threw a fit. Even members of the delegation threw a fit. Rushern took a beating. But I believe in my heart that had Rushern not stood firm, we would not have the superintendent we have now, and we would not be moving forward to improve our schools."

"Somebody had to throw down the gauntlet, hold up the dirty laundry and say, 'This, and no more,'" says Baker.

Last summer, he held hearings around the county and took the delegation on a show-and-tell bus tour, with members giving colleagues a firsthand look at problems in their districts.

"It was a real eye-opener," says Del. James W. Hubbard, a Bowie Democrat. "It brought home the theme that Delegate Baker was stressing, that we're one county and we have to work together."

Sizing up a crowd and forging relationships is something Baker learned while growing up.

The son of a career Army man, he moved around the country, attending five elementary schools, two middle schools and two high schools. The family of three boys and a girl settled for a while in Beverly, Mass., a suburb on the North Shore of Boston.

There, Baker made a name for himself as a running back and defensive back on the high school football team, and learned about race.

"One day, I'm walking down the street and a woman calls out and waves," says Baker, laughing. "Before I could get all puffed up about being recognized, a friend says, 'You're the only black person in the city.' We were that isolated."

He attended Howard University in Washington because his best friend did and studied political science and history "because I knew at 17 that I wanted to go into politics."

One of the first students he met would become his wife, Christa, "the only person who would get dressed up at 7 o'clock to catch a bus — that impressed me," he says.

He joined the Student Government Association "and learned how to knock on doors and have people tell you to go to hell," and later enrolled in Howard's law school.

After graduation in 1986, Baker worked for Massachusetts Democratic Sen. John Kerry and for a district nonprofit group that promoted low- and moderate-income

housing. His wife was an aide to former Pennsylvania Democratic Rep. William H. Gray III.

Looking for a small-town atmosphere, Rushern and Christa Baker settled in Cheverly, between the Capital Beltway and the Washington line.

He ran for delegate, won and was assigned to the Judiciary Committee, where he became known for sometimes overheated rhetoric.

"There wasn't a bill that came through that I wasn't deeply and emotionally attached to, from drunken driving to where a stop sign should go," he recalls. "I would get on the floor and just yell stuff. And every time I was defeated, I acted like I had just lost a patient."

The pressure to be all things began taking its toll on Baker and his family.

Aja, his eldest daughter, introduced herself as "Rushern Baker, for change," mimicking his bumper sticker. His son struggled in school.

It was House Speaker Taylor who advised Baker to step back, take a deep breath and pick his spots.

Taylor says: "I could see through the propensity to be hot-headed and saw someone gifted. I was concerned the hot-headedness would, perhaps, destroy that gift."

Now, Taylor says, Baker "can be anything he wants to be. I wouldn't want to see him leave the House, but that's selfish on my part."

Others also have counseled him to stay and move up the ladder of leadership, but Hubbard says he can understand Baker's desire to be county executive.

"As far as you can go in the legislature, you're still tied to the process. You're still tied to people who tell you what you can and can't do," he says. "He has a vision for the county, and the best way to get us there is by being executive."