

# Busch brings home the bacon

## Speaker uses power to get extra money for Annapolis

By PAMELA WOOD

Staff Writer

In the waning hours of the Maryland General Assembly session, House Speaker Michael E. Busch used his considerable influence to direct millions of taxpayer dollars to Annapolis projects, including an aging arts center and a turf baseball field for kids.

Now Busch, a Democrat, is being questioned by Republicans for going around the normal budgeting process to help his home district.

The projects were added during a joint House-Senate conference committee on the state's capital budget. The projects were not included in either the original House or Senate versions of the capital budget.

Lawmakers didn't see the conference committee's report until Monday night, the last day of the 90-day General Assembly session.

"I just sat there in shock. Where was the process?" said Del. Ron George, a Republican, who like Busch represents District 30 and the greater Annapolis area. "We went through a lot of work for three months, only to have things that weren't part of the process go through."

According to Busch, the projects include:

- Redirecting \$600,000 previously set aside for burying electrical wires in Annapolis to the Maryland Hall for the Creative Arts. The money hadn't been used.

- Redirecting \$250,000 previously allocated for the Eastport Volunteer Fire Department to the old Annapolis recreation center building downtown to facilitate redevelopment. The money hadn't been used.

- \$250,000 to the Ripken Foundation toward a turf field project for the Boys & Girls Club at Bates Heritage Park.

- \$1 million for Bates Middle School for improvements to the gym and theater.

- \$400,000 for Annapolis High School for upgrades to the field house at the stadium.

Normally, local construction projects like these involve individual "bond bills" that are drawn up describing the projects. In order to be included in the budget, the proponents have to make their case before Anne Arundel's lawmakers as well as the House Appropriations Committee.

Or they can be put in the governor's budget proposal, which is subject to hearings.

On the House of Delegates floor on Monday night, Republican Del. Herb McMillan tried unsuccessfully to get answers from the conference committee about the Maryland Hall and Bates Middle projects just before the final vote.

George was beside him, flipping through the budget documents they had just received and taking calls from other delegates upset at seeing so much money headed to Annapolis.

In an interview, McMillan said he's uncomfortable with the normal process being circumvented. The process assures lawmakers that projects are ready to go and the money will be well spent.

"Nobody's arguing that a project isn't worthy, but it wasn't presented for capital budget funding," he said. "I'm disappointed with the process. The legislature is not supposed to be a one-man show."

But Busch makes no apologies for bringing home the ba-

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con to the district. It's part of his privilege as Speaker of the House of Delegates, he said.

"Being the presiding officer gives me a little more input into the capital budget," he said.

Busch said the projects are all worthy and some had been trying for years to get state funding.

Two of the projects — Maryland Hall and the old rec center — are making use of money that hadn't been spent and otherwise would have been dumped back into the state's general fund.

"I'm proud to support these projects. You can write that with a capital 'P,'" Busch said.

Busch said Bates Middle School has an antiquated facility that officials worry could sidetrack school efforts to become an arts magnet center. And Maryland Hall has struggled to raise money for improvements, such as replacing aging windows, he said.

Busch's wife is a member of Maryland Hall's board of directors. Maryland Hall, Bates Middle and the Bates Heritage Park are within a mile of Busch's home.

Linnell Bowen, director of Maryland Hall, said the money will help kick off a campaign to refurbish the theater, replace windows, install a freight elevator and make other improvements.

Bowen said she had hoped the transfer of money from the underground wires project to the arts center would come through, but "I didn't know for sure until the last day of the session because one never knows."

Earlier in the session, Busch used his influence to nail down \$250,000 for renovating the Market House in downtown Annapolis as well as \$100,000 for a redevelopment project on Clay Street — against the wishes of the other local lawmakers.

Busch turned the tables on his critics, pointing out that they voted against the capital

budget — both the original version and the revised version, both of which included scores of worthy projects in Anne Arundel and beyond.

"It didn't seem to bother them to vote against those projects," he said, adding that when the projects are finished, "Each of them will find a way to get to the front of the ribbon cutting."

*pwood@capitalgazette.com*