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Speaker of the people

Despite his power, Busch, the former history teacher, welcomes dissent, listens and learns

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Nancy Earnest and Edie Segree often joke that they might not have a job the next time they walk into their office.

But it's not because their boss, Michael E. Busch, the highest ranking official in the Maryland House of Delegates, has a bad temper or is unhappy with their work performance. It's because Earnest and Segree aren't afraid to argue with the speaker of the House. It's one of the many things they like about the Anne Arundel County Democrat; it's also one of the things he likes about them.

"Mike Busch doesn't surround himself with 'yes' people," Segree says. "We can say, 'We don't agree with this,' and he listens to us."

The openness to criticism is representative of Busch's entire professional demeanor. He is always available and often walks down from his office on the first floor of the State House in Annapolis to talk to reporters in the basement of the building.

Usually, the 58-year-old casually strolls in reporters' offices, sometimes takes a seat, and begins conversations about anything from basketball to otherwise private negotiations between him and key state officials. It is commonplace for Busch to reveal details that Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. and Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr. will not.

"He talks to everybody," Earnest says. "It's not just the lobbyist or the 'important person.'"

Segree adds: "He's very accessible."

SEE BUSCH PAGE 10A



Despite being the most powerful member of the House of Delegates, Speaker Michael E. Busch, 58, welcomes criticism and is one of the state's most accessible lawmakers, colleagues say.

Busch

Continued from page 1A

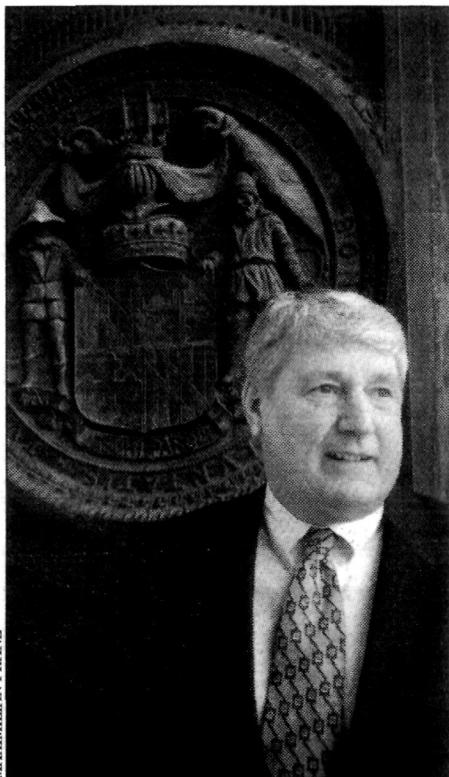
Both women have been working for Busch for 10 years and say the most noticeable change in their boss is his more polished public speaking. Yet, most people respect and admire the former St. Mary's High School teacher and coach for the ways in which he hasn't changed.

"He's a straightforward, common-sense guy," says House Majority Leader Kumar P. Barve, D-Montgomery, who has been friends with Busch for 15 years. "He's got a common touch and he listens to people from different backgrounds and I really appreciate that."

Modest beginnings

But those who work with him say he's much more complex than the "aw-shucks guy" many describe. He learns issues inside and out until he knows each and every detail, they say.

Busch, a husband and a father of two girls who are 9 years old and 6 years old, possesses a humble charisma that reveals an almost reluctant leader. When he walks, he's usually got his



In the House of Delegates for 18 years, Michael E. Busch earlier this month was elected to his second term as speaker, the highest-ranking position in the chamber.

hands in his pockets and a bow to his head, postures that together seem to indicate he's in deep thought.

The idea to run for public office was planted by St. Mary's High School students' parents, who thought the basketball coach and history teacher would make a great state representative.

"I had some trepidation about it," Busch recalls. "The last thing I thought of was being in public office."

That was obvious when, in 1986,

he got elected after his second try for the state office, was appointed to the House Judiciary Committee and the only professional clothing he had was a blue blazer, a gray shirt and gray pants, Busch says with a bashful laugh.

"I didn't want to say much the first couple of years because I didn't want anybody to know I didn't know anything," the 18-year delegate says.

Today, both his wardrobe and knowledge are more extensive.

Busch was born in Baltimore and spent most of his pre-political life in the sports world as a basketball coach. He still is the administrator for youth athletics for the Anne Arundel County Department of Recreation and Parks.

Like most politicians, Busch isn't popular with everyone.

He and Ehrlich have had disagreements over medical malpractice reform and slot-machine legislation, which the governor has introduced for the third consecutive year. And Busch may not come in at the top of the House Republicans' list of favorite people.

On the opening day of this year's session, most Republicans abstained from voting for House Speaker when Busch was nominated again and did not move from their seats during several standing ovations.

The party was mainly frustrated after Republican members' debate was cut off during the consideration of overrid-



Edie Segree, left, and Nancy Earnest, back right, joke that they are likely to lose their jobs one day as aides to Michael E. Busch for arguing the issues with their boss.

ing Ehrlich's veto on the medical malpractice bill passed during the special session late last month, says House Minority Leader George C. Edwards.

Still, Edwards adds that he and Busch have known one another a long time and he is optimistic about solving the issue.

"I think there's some positives that

we did meet and we'll continue to meet," he says. "We want to try to work things out."

Busch says he believes no one should stay as presiding officer for more than two terms. He is now in his second. As for his delegate's seat, he says he plans to run again — even though "my wife would like me to leave tomorrow."