



Michael E. Busch, the speaker of the House of Delegates, says the evidence does not support claims that he and his fellow Democrats are unsupportive of business.

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Busch speaks up

House speaker feels slots debate has overshadowed accomplishments

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Most Marylanders know him as the single biggest roadblock to slot machines. For some, that's a good thing; for others, bad.

Either way, Michael E. Busch, the highest-ranking official in the House of Delegates, thinks the intense focus on slots has obscured more pressing issues facing the state and the accomplishments of the General Assembly during the past three years.

The Anne Arundel County Democrat has served as speaker of the House for three legislative sessions, and he has imposed a personal term limit on himself — he does not believe a presiding officer should hold the position for more than two elected terms, or eight years.

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Busch

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Now approaching the halfway mark, Busch acknowledges his leadership style differs dramatically from his predecessor, but says the change was necessary to accommodate the administration change and has been successful in moving Maryland forward while promoting the Democratic agenda.

Warm embrace

On opening day of the 2003 legislative session, Busch's first as speaker and Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr.'s first as governor, the two men greeted each other with hugs in the House chamber. Ehrlich and Busch have been friends since serving together as freshmen in the House of Delegates in 1987, Busch said.

"I consider him a friend. Bob is a guy that's hard not to like," Busch said.

Yet, it's hard to imagine the two greeting each other so warmly after their constant and intense political battling during the last three years.

Busch said some of the difficulty stems from Ehrlich's role as the head of a political party that "wants to expand its base philosophy in the state."

"They have actively targeted members of the Democratic Party who Bob came to the legislature with. That's part of his job," Busch acknowledged. "My job is to go out to the citizens of Maryland and tell them what we stood for and what the governor and the Republican Party stood for."

The former high school teacher and coach finds the basic philosophy of sportsmanship helpful in his current position.

"In sports, you know to compete hard and, at the end of the day, respect the opposition," he said.

Busch recently received criticism from a former delegate for his leadership style. He tends to lead through the entire Democratic caucus, rather than relying mostly on the leadership, as predecessor Casper R. Taylor did.

Former Del. John A. Hurson, who resigned from the House earlier this year, recently told the Gazette newspapers Busch's method is less effective than Taylor's.

But Busch defended his style, claiming it was a necessary change to respond to the changing political atmosphere in Annapolis.

"I think that Cas would have had to re-evaluate how he managed the House under this dynamic," he said. Because of the needs for overrides under a Republican governor — the Democratic legislature rarely overrode a veto under previous Democratic governors — Busch said he needs 85 votes to pass legislation, instead of a simple majority of 71.

"You have to meet and engage with every member of your caucus," he said.

Since it first became clear Busch would stand in the way of legalized slots — one of Ehrlich's key initiatives — the irony of the situation has been frequently noted. Taylor, successfully ousted by Republicans in 2002, supported legalizing slots to fund the expensive Thornton education mandates.

Busch said he accepts, for better or worse, the role of chief slots opponent that has been pinned on him, but he would hope the citizens of Maryland can understand his position and look past it.

"I'd like to think that they see someone who created substantive discussion on the issue, and prevented unjust enrichment to a few people," he said about his slots opposition.

"As far as career initiatives, I would

hope people would recognize I've been consistent on funding quality education and higher education. And I believe in an accessible and affordable health system. Many times the successes are lost sight of because of disagreement on issues."

He also points to examples of important measures that the administration and General Assembly successfully worked together on but are not always highlighted, including the flush tax, witness intimidation and lead paint initiatives.

House Minority Leader George Edwards, however, said politics have made it more difficult to work together under Busch's tenure, though he avoided attributing it solely to the speaker.

"As far as myself and Mike, we've been friends a long time. We get along, but I think it is getting more political," said the Western Maryland Republican. "I think that comes from his caucus, or his leadership group putting pressure on him."

Edwards said the Democrats in the legislature have consistently opposed any initiatives proposed by the governor or Republican lawmakers to prevent Republicans from notching victories.

Though Edwards refrained from taking direct jabs at Busch, relations between the speaker and House Republicans have often been less than diplomatic.

Last year the Republican caucus members refused to vote for the speaker when he angered them by moving the minority whip from his traditional seat at the front of the chamber.

Maryland's Republican Party will target Busch, along with his fellow Anne Arundel County legislators, in

2006 in an effort to win over Democrat-held seats in more conservative areas. Ehrlich won Anne Arundel County in 2002 with 65 percent of the vote.

Republicans likely will try to paint Busch as an anti-business, tax-and-spend liberal. It won't be the first time Busch has heard the label.

On more than one occasion the speaker has defended himself and the legislature against attacks that they are opponents of the business community.

He constantly reminds whoever will listen that Maryland has below-average unemployment numbers, a high median income and an excellent system of higher education — all factors he says indicate a positive business environment.

And while it may have appeared an attempt to remain on the good side of the county's most powerful legislator, the **Annapolis and Anne Arundel County Chamber of Commerce** this year named Busch its legislator of the year.

"The reason why we recognized him last summer was for what he's been able to do locally for his constituency and the county," said the chamber's president, Bob Burdon.

The speaker has supported the county's education system and successfully advocated for county transportation and infrastructure initiatives, Burdon said.

"We think that Speaker Busch is a very pragmatic legislator. We don't perceive him as subscribing to an ideology that casts him into a role where he refuses to listen to workable solutions from different sides," he said. "We don't always agree on all things, but that's just part of the course of things."