

Taylor denies any ethical impropriety



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Support: A fellow delegate offers his hand to Del. Gerald J. Curran before the Baltimore lawmaker reads a letter of resignation ending an ethics probe into his business dealings.

Speaker's conduct in land deal questioned on day Curran resigns

House leader rejects probe

Delegates give emotional send-off to 'fallen comrade'

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SUN STAFF

Ethics questions continued to overshadow the General Assembly session yesterday, as a veteran delegate resigned his seat and House Speaker Casper R. Taylor Jr. defended himself against a report that he had inappropriately intervened in a Western Maryland land deal.

Del. Gerald J. Curran ended his 32-year career in the House of Delegates with a standing ovation from his colleagues — many of whom wept after he read a letter of resignation that ended an ethics probe into his business dealings.

Later in the day, Taylor emphatically denied any wrongdoing in the state land transaction in 1994 that involved a longtime friend, and told reporters that he saw no reason to turn the matter over to the legislature's ethics committee.

The *Washington Post* reported yesterday that Taylor, an Allegany County Democrat, had intervened with state officials and an appraiser to help Cumberland businessman James J. Oberhaus win a land swap and coal-mining rights deal.

The terms of the arrangement will over time bring the state some \$1 million less than it should have collected,



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Emphatic reaction: Speaker Casper R. Taylor Jr. denies that he tried to influence the terms of a Western Maryland land deal involving a longtime friend.

according to an appraiser involved in the matter, the newspaper reported.

In response yesterday, Taylor denied that he had tried to influence the terms of the deal. He said that he prodded the state to conclude its agreement with Oberhaus but that his actions were typical constituent service.

"We are often called upon by constituents who are friends or who are simply residents of the area that we represent for assistance in all kinds of [See Assembly, 6A]

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Constituents: Del. Gerald J. Curran's resignation from the House met with a mix of applause and disappointment from residents of the 43rd District. [PAGE 1B]

Ethical questions continue to overshadow the Assembly

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matters involving government," Taylor said during a State House news conference. "This is our job, this is part of what we are elected to do, and we should not be ashamed for doing it well."

Focusing on a key aspect of the article, Taylor acknowledged that he had called a coal appraiser involved in the deal, but only to urge him to conclude his work quickly, not to pressure him into altering his appraisals.

The appraiser, Henry F. Moomau of Oakland in Garrett County, said in an interview yesterday that he felt that Taylor was "pressuring me to get it done."

He added that he did not think that Taylor's involvement was inappropriate.

But Moomau repeated his contention that the deal, as it was finally struck, was overly generous to Oberhaus.

"I think it was absolutely a great deal for Oberhaus," said Moomau. "I think it was a bad deal for the state."

Taylor said he would not refer the matter to the legislative ethics committee because there was no suggestion that he had violated any state ethics laws. Nor, he added, had he made "a dime" in the deal.

Taylor's decision not to launch what would have been the third ethics investigation this session — following probes of Curran and former Sen. Larry Young, who was expelled from the Assembly in January for violating state ethics laws — drew bipartisan support from several legislators interviewed yesterday.

"Nowhere was it alleged that he received any financial remuneration for what he considered constituent service," said Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller. "Something else has to be developed in this case for a matter to be taken up by the ethics committee."

Question of 'trust'

But Kathleen S. Skullney, executive director of the legislative watchdog group Common Cause/Maryland, said Taylor was making a mistake by not turning the matter over to the panel.

"I think it would be the most exemplary act of leadership to take it to the ethics committee," Skullney said.

The ethics panel, she said, would not be looking for technical violations of ethics laws, but whether Taylor's "insider" help for a friend was inappropriate.

"The question is whether the trust of the body has been damaged by the action," Skullney said.

Sen. Michael J. Collins, co-chairman of the ethics committee, sidestepped a question about Taylor's decision but suggested he was relieved that the panel had not been asked to take up another investigation in the middle of the Assembly's annual 90-day session.

"It certainly occurs to me that at this time of the session, the workload of the members as well as the professional staff is enormous," said Collins, a Baltimore County Democrat.

"We have 45 days to complete the legislative business of the session."

Wrongdoing denied

Wrongdoing denied

In the House yesterday, the legislative business was a prelude to Curran's departure.

At the end of a 1½-hour floor session, Curran rose to read a letter he delivered Thursday to Taylor, saying that he was resigning effective 1 p.m. yesterday.

Curran cited his health, the cost of defending himself, and his desire to spare his family any further stress over the ethics probe as the reasons for not completing his eighth term in the House. He continued to maintain that he has done nothing wrong.

Curran, an insurance broker, was due to appear Monday before the ethics committee to defend some of the insurance arrangements he has entered in recent years.

The committee's investigation was launched this month after *The Sun* reported that he aggressively lobbied state officials to approve an insurance program for which he ultimately served as the broker, an arrangement that could net him tens of thousands of dollars in commissions.

He also entered potentially lucrative arrangements with state offices and private enterprises with business before the legislature, and did not report that to the ethics committee.

While it was clearly an emotional moment for Curran, his voice wavered little. Twice he took a handkerchief from his pocket, though he did not appear to shed tears.

About two dozen friends and family members — including Curran's five grown children and seven grandchildren — watched his

last moments as a member of the General Assembly from the House gallery.

Among those in the gallery and on the House floor were three cousins from his politically prominent family — Maryland Attorney General J. Joseph Curran Jr., Baltimore City Councilman Robert W. Curran and former Councilman Martin E. "Mike" Curran.

Curran's wife, Jeanette, sat with Polly Taylor, the speaker's wife, on the House floor throughout the morning session.

Lawmakers stood and applauded as Curran walked slowly down the House's center aisle. Some were crying.

"It's like a fallen comrade — it hurts," said Del. Kenneth Holt, a Baltimore County Republican. "I respect his commitment of service to the state for so long."

As he made his way toward the chamber door, Curran was embraced by Del. John F. Wood Jr., a St. Mary's County Democrat who has temporarily replaced him as chairman of the House Commerce and Government Matters Committee.

Del. Joseph J. "Sonny" Minnick, a Baltimore County Democrat and close friend, ushered Curran and his wife out the door and to their car parked at the rear of the State House.

Later, Taylor issued a statement praising Curran, whom he had named to head the Commerce and Government Matters Committee in 1994.

"For 32 years, Gerry Curran has served the residents of his Baltimore City district with distinction, honor and integrity," Taylor said. "My heart goes out to Gerry and his family."



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Reasoning: Speaker Casper R. Taylor says he will not refer the matter to the ethics panel because there was no suggestion that he had violated any state ethics laws. Nor, he added, had he made "a dime" in the deal.

Several House members said they were relieved by Curran's resignation, which saved them from a potentially painful floor vote on possible ethics sanctions against him.

"It was a no-win situation," said Del. Ron Guns, a Cecil County Democrat who heads the Environmental Matters Committee.

"Sixteen years I've known Gerry, never once did he propose something that wasn't totally above board," Guns said. "I think it was too much for him, 45 more days of this."

Sun staff writers Michael Dresser and JoAnna Daemrich contributed to this article.



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Last greeting: Delegates, including Virginia P. Clagett and John S. Arnick (applauding), show support for colleague Gerald R. Curran before the start of yesterday's House session.