

# New State Treasurer's Country Boy Roots Belie Seasoned Political Bent

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Sitting in the plush state treasurer's office, Richard N. Dixon pulls out a copy of the latest bond sale book, turns to the title page and points to his name.

"Look, that's me," he says, eyes beaming. "It's kind of exciting to see your name in print like that.

"And now my name will be on every check the state sends out."

Dixon, 57, elected state treasurer last month after 13 years in the House of Delegates, can hardly contain himself.

The "country boy" who grew up on Charles Street, a poor black area of rural Westminster, now occupies the highest state office ever held by someone from Carroll County — no small feat for a black Democrat in a conservative district that's 97 percent white.

Remembering his roots brought him to where he is.

"It's a matter of living and growing up in the country," Dixon says. "I never had to take any polls to find out what's important to people. There are a number of general stores you can go into any evening and figure out what's going on."

His neighbors want criminals to serve their full sentences, government to stay out of their lives, low taxes, and their delegate "never to bring up gun control."

Dixon's record reflects their wishes. Last session, he was the only Democrat supporting a Republican income tax cut, and he's always pushed for tough crime legislation, including proposals to abolish the parole system.

"I'm a Republican, but I've always voted for him because he's a good man, an honest man," says Ida Myers, 73, owner of Myers' Grocery on Westminster's Main Street, who has known Dixon since he was a boy.

Dixon was born in 1938, the sixth generation of his family to grow up in Carroll. The area was even more rural then: "You could not have hogs today in the places they had hogs back then," he says.

It was also more segregated, with "separate drinking fountains and a balcony for blacks in the movies, so you were aware you were black."

Even so, the Dixon family

was well respected.

Dixon's father, Thomas, was a bus driver, projectionist at the local movie theater, and a custodian. At the county library, where he spent years as a janitor, a room bears his name and his portrait on a wall.

Dixon's mother, Mamie, helped start the Robert Moton School for black children, which Dixon attended from 7th grade through high school. She was PTA president and volunteered for the Union Street First United Methodist Church, where Dixon still worships.

Dixon registered Democrat at age 18 because he admired Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry Truman.

"They were strong leaders who took risks," he says, "and Truman came from humble beginnings. They were people who believed in democracy."

Staying a Democrat kept him effective in a majority-Democrat state: "I wouldn't be treasurer today if I weren't a Democrat. And I wouldn't have been able to get so much legislation passed for my county."

While his constituents swear by him, others feel betrayed by him.

Dixon never joined the legislature's black caucus, and last session didn't vote for a bill to increase the minority share of state contracts.

"My constituents were against it," he says. "I represent my constituents first. Most of my colleagues don't understand that."

Nor does the state NAACP, which endorsed Pauline H. Menes, a white liberal Prince George's County Democrat, for treasurer. Hanley J. Norment, the group's president, calls Dixon "Maryland's own Clarence Thomas" and says Dixon is too focused on re-election.

"Dixon has a record of being frightened like a rabbit," Norment says.

Norment worries Dixon's attitude will hurt minorities, given that as treasurer he'll have a say in state contracts. But Dixon has told the NAACP that the larger constituency he now represents includes minorities, and promises to be more visible in the minority community.

As treasurer, Dixon represents the legislature on the three-member Board of Public Works, with the governor and comptroller. He also invests the state's money, drawing on his 26 years as a Merrill Lynch stockbroker and experience on the House Appropriations Committee.

Dixon holds bachelor's and master's degrees from the former Morgan State College. He is an Army veteran, with a year's service in Vietnam, where earned a Bronze Star and saw his life's outlook change.

"Things do not bother me anymore," he says. "I don't get upset about administrative problems."

He drives a Corvette and is known to wear a full-length mink and enjoy a cigar. His office radio stays tuned to jazz station WEAA-Morgan State. He and his wife of 36 years, Grayson, take at least five vacations a year. They have two grown sons and a 7-year-old granddaughter.

"I believe in enjoying life," Dixon says. "You only go around once."