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HEADLINE: Lieutenant Governor Packing His Bags -- for China Trade Mission

BYLINE: Annapolis Notebook

BODY:

Maryland's first high-level overseas trade mission since Gov. Martin O'Malley (D) took office is scheduled for next month. But O'Malley won't be making the trip to China himself.

The governor is instead dispatching Lt. Gov. Anthony G. Brown (D) to lead a delegation of a half-dozen state officials, who plan to visit businesses in China with investments in Maryland, as well as some in which Marylanders have invested, and to look for prospects.

On the second leg of the two-week trip, which starts Sept. 16, Brown will head for Taiwan on what is being billed as a cultural and educational mission as part of his duties with the National Lieutenant Governors Association.

Economic development is one of several areas O'Malley has asked Brown to oversee, and aides say Brown's trip is consistent with that job. O'Malley will make future trips, they added. Late September might also be a pivotal time in making choices about Maryland's structural deficit.

-- John Wagner

O'Malley Goes for a Spin

It is not often that Gov. Martin O'Malley gets behind the wheel. One of the perks of both of his current job and his old one, mayor of Baltimore, is a sport-utility vehicle driven by a law-enforcement officer.

So O'Malley, it seemed, made the most of his freedom last week on a test drive of a solar-powered vehicle donated to the state. At an event staged on the boardwalk of Ocean City, where O'Malley was attending the conference of the Maryland Association of Counties, the governor was offered the chance to take a spin in the overhauled, open-air hunting vehicle that features a solar panel on its roof.

O'Malley took the wheel of "this cool new car," as he put it, with a representative of BP Solar, the company that donated it, riding shotgun. A state trooper was perched on the back, and O'Malley looped around the roped-off event site, with some curious beachgoers and a modest media contingent looking on.

The trooper hopped off, and then the fun began. Before anyone realized it, the four-wheel-drive solar vehicle had disappeared into the streets of Ocean City, with only O'Malley and the BP representative on board, navigating traffic.

The troopers assigned to guard O'Malley appeared shocked and slightly amused. Radio communication ensued, and one trooper soon moved in the direction of the street to look for the governor. O'Malley returned a few minutes later, unscathed.

BP Solar is donating similar vehicles to all 50 states, hoping to promote their use. The Department of General Services has been asked to find uses for Maryland's car.

-- John Wagner

Big Names, Timely Topics

With no statewide elections looming, the atmosphere at the annual gathering of the Maryland Association of Counties in Ocean City last week was far more laid back than in previous years.

The four-day event still drew a who's who of Maryland politicians, but there was far less jockeying for position among the state's up-and-comers amid the hundreds of county officials who attended.

A few former officeholders also showed, including former attorney general J. Joseph Curran (D), who was spotted at Friday's night's crab feast grooving to the cover band's rendition of Neil Diamond's "Sweet Caroline." Curran, O'Malley's father-in-law, was accompanied by first lady Catherine Curran O'Malley, who is a District Court judge in Baltimore, and several other family members.

The state's current attorney general, Douglas F. Gansler (D), was among several prominent officials appearing on panels at the conference. During a session on fighting gang violence, Gansler touted a law to aid prosecutors that passed the General Assembly this year. But Gansler said the legislation was considerably weakened by defense lawyers serving in the legislature. He said their work on the bill was "a little like asking the elephants to pass the peanuts."

Meanwhile, U.S. Sen. Benjamin L. Cardin (D-Md.) and state House Speaker Michael E. Busch (D-Anne Arundel) participated in separate panel discussions related to health care. Comptroller Peter Franchot (D) presided over a conversation about land preservation. And Lt. Gov. Anthony G. Brown kicked off a discussion about the military's base-realignment process, which is bringing tens of thousands of jobs to Maryland.

-- John Wagner

GRAPHIC: IMAGE; By John Wagner -- The Washington Post; Lobbying was in full force during the Maryland Association of Counties conference last week in Ocean City. Dozens of signs shouted opposition to legalizing slots, one

idea being considered to bridge a budget shortfall.

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