



FOCUS - 51 of 67 DOCUMENTS

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HEADLINE: Ehrlich Entourage Aims to Open Doors in Israel

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BODY:

As you read this, Maryland Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. is nearing the end of the first overseas trade mission of his administration. The Republican governor's six-day spin through Israel began Tuesday.

During the trip aimed at drumming up business for Maryland companies, Ehrlich's schedule included meeting with the editorial board of the Jerusalem Post and attending a reception arranged by the U.S. ambassador, where he was expected to hobnob with Israel's "captains of industry," as his itinerary put it.

Maryland has long had a vibrant trade relationship with Israel, fostered in part by the Maryland/Israel Development Center. The nonprofit, which receives one-third of its funds from the Maryland Department of Business and Economic Development, was created 11 years ago by then-Gov. William Donald Schaefer (D).

Both Schaefer and former governor Parris N. Glendening (D) visited the Holy Land, said the center's executive director, Barry Bogage.

"When the governor comes, people sit up and pay attention," Bogage said. "You use it as a door opener. Maryland businesses want to expand markets, but they can't necessarily get in to see whoever they need to see, like Col. XYZ who's in charge of bioprotectionist devices.

"When we go with the governor, on the other hand, while the governor gets to meet with the defense minister, we ask for parallel meetings with other officials, who might include Col. XYZ."

The highlights of Ehrlich's trip include a meeting with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

Ehrlich is traveling with nearly 30 people, but the state is paying for only him, his press secretary, his chief of staff, three economic development officials, Secretary of Budget and Fiscal Planning Chip DiPaula Jr. and Secretary of Health and Mental Hygiene Nelson J. Sabatini, according to a Business and Economic Development spokeswoman. The cost to taxpayers: \$52,350.

A new poll found that U.S. Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski remains popular among Maryland voters. But her likely Republican challenger, state Sen. Edward J. Pipkin of Queen Anne's County, starts the race with a respectable degree of name recognition for a newcomer to statewide politics.

The survey of 831 likely voters by Gonzales Research & Marketing Strategies found that virtually all of them recognized Mikulski's name. About 56 percent have a favorable opinion of the Democrat, who has served 27 years in Congress and is seeking a fourth term in the Senate.

Meanwhile, 13 percent of those surveyed viewed Pipkin favorably, 20 percent were neutral and 3 percent viewed him unfavorably, the poll found.

Although 64 percent did not recognize the Eastern Shore Republican's name, pollster Patrick Gonzales said Pipkin's 36 percent name recognition is "not a bad position from which to begin his charge," particularly given that he has an entire year -- and plenty of cash -- to make his case to Maryland voters.

Still, the poll found that if the election were held today, Mikulski would beat Pipkin 57 percent to 26 percent, with strong support from Democrats and independents.

The Gonzales poll, which has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.5 percentage points, also tested the strength of the Democratic contenders for president. The poll found that former Vermont governor Howard Dean continues to lead the field among likely Democratic primary voters, with 23 percent support.

U.S. Sen. Joseph I. Lieberman (D-Conn.) was next, with 20 percent, followed by former NATO commander Wesley Clark, with 11 percent. The other six contenders scored in single digits, with vocal anti-war Rep. Dennis J. Kucinich (D-Ohio) bringing up the rear with the support of just 1 percent of likely primary voters.

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