

Schaefer set to don a new cap

Former mayor, governor prepares to take over comptroller's office

By SARA MARSH
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William Donald Schaefer, former Baltimore mayor and two-term governor renowned for his silly hat collection, is preparing to don a cap of a different sort in a week — that of state comptroller.

But as the Pasadena resident prepares to take over the post held for the past 40 years by his friend, the late, legendary comptroller Louis L. Goldstein, many in Maryland's political circles are at a loss as to what to expect.

Is he a former governor trying to reclaim the glory of his administration from a successor he doesn't care for? Will he re-emerge as the man known for his spurts of anger and goofy, unpredictable behavior? Or will he be the seasoned politician and savvy manager renowned in Baltimore for his "do-it-now" style.

Then there's the question of whether, at age 77, Mr. Schaefer is too old for the comptroller's job, or if he will even know what to do.

Those last questions Mr. Schaefer was quick to answer as he sat last month in a darkly paneled, second-floor conference room in the Baltimore law firm of Gordon, Feinblatt, Rothman, Hofferger & Hollander, where he works as an adviser on government-related matters.

No, he isn't too old for the job, especially since Mr. Goldstein died in office at age 85 in July. And, yes, he knows what the job entails — probably better than most others.

"If I didn't think I was physically able and young enough, I wouldn't have filed," Mr. Schaefer said, smiling. "This is a job I can do."

But he admits that his style will be different from Mr. Goldstein's, known affectionately around both the comptroller's office and the state as "Louie."

"Louie is different from Schaefer," Mr. Schaefer said, reverting to his habit of speaking of

himself in the third person. "He liked to go to every church dinner.

He was on the road three-quarters of the time as a goodwill ambassador.

"I'm not going to do that. I don't have that dynamic energy he had. I don't want to do that."

What Mr. Schaefer does want to do is take a close look at the comptroller's office and determine if there are any areas where changes need to be made. But he stressed that he has no plans to take an ax to the office or close any local branches.

Instead, he simply wants to examine an organization that for the past 40 years has been run efficiently but quietly by one man — the only boss most of its employees have ever known.

"Louie was a very unique man," said Mr. Schaefer, who served for eight years as governor alongside Mr. Goldstein on the state's powerful Board of Public Works. "He never really let you know what he did. He talked only about collecting income taxes and refunds and returning found money.

"No one ever knew he had 1,107 employees. I didn't know that," Mr. Schaefer said. "You didn't challenge Louie's budget."

In the three months since Mr. Schaefer soundly trounced Republican Larry Epstein in the general election, he has been familiarizing himself with the comptroller's office, its activities and staff. What he has found, he said, is a highly competent staff.

And it is the seasoned politician and savvy manager who appears ready to take the reins of the office after a 4 p.m. swearing-in ceremony Jan. 25 at the State House.

Once in the job, Mr. Schaefer said he wants to take the comptroller's office in a slightly different direction. He will focus more on

promoting economic development in Maryland, especially in economically distressed western Maryland, as well as Baltimore City.

And Mr. Schaefer said he will be asking the county executives in prosperous counties such as Montgomery and Baltimore to help funnel businesses that can't be located in their jurisdictions to other areas of the state.

"There's a real opportunity for the whole state to work together," he said.

Two governors

As for his other major role — as a member of the three-person Board of Public Works — Mr. Schaefer said he is prepared. The board, made up of Gov. Parris N. Glendening, state Treasurer Richard N. Dixon and the comptroller, awards lucrative state contracts.

While Mr. Schaefer and Mr. Glendening have never had the warmest of relationships, Mr. Schaefer said he expects they will be able to work together without difficulty, despite the fact that Mr. Glendening initially wanted one of his supporters to run for comptroller — not Mr. Schaefer.

"When I was out of office, the governor didn't treat me very well," Mr. Schaefer said of Mr. Glendening. "He roughed me up when he didn't have to."

Nonetheless, Mr. Schaefer insists he will not be trying to act as a "second governor" on the board, but rather as the comptroller, whose job is very different. Whereas a governor's job is to spend money and promote development, Mr. Schaefer said his job is to oversee spending and ensure it's done wisely.

"I think it will be up to Dixon and I to see the money is well-spent, not just spent because we have it," he said. "The only time (the governor) will have trouble with me is when he brings something to the board I'm not for."

"He (Mr. Glendening) doesn't have a second vote in me."

Regardless of the role Mr. Schaefer takes on the board, political insiders predict board meetings will now be packed sessions, mainly because Marylanders are going to want to see how Mr. Schaefer and Mr. Glendening interact.

Some are predicting the meetings will become "the best show in Annapolis," and even some of Mr. Glendening's staff members have joked they should sell tickets.

Anne Arundel County legislators who worked with Mr. Schaefer as governor said they are glad he has returned to political life and hope he will be happy as comptroller — even those lawmakers who have disagreed with him as governor.

"One of the greatest traits he has is integrity and independence from the governor," state Sen. Philip C. Jimeno, D-Brooklyn Park, said. "He's been supportive of the county. I think he'll be good for the county."

Del. John R. Leopold, R-Pasadena, agreed. Both he and Mr. Jimeno represent the district in which Mr. Schaefer has a townhome where he spends most of his time.

"I think he is one of the most-informed, efficient, elected officials in the state," Mr. Leopold said. "I think he's someone who's tried to do what's best for everyone in the state."

Coming home

Mr. Schaefer welcomes the return to active political life, something he desperately missed since leaving the governor's mansion in 1994 because of term limits.

"If you really like public life, you miss it," he said. "In the four years I've been away, I missed it."

But the never-married Baltimore native will find life in Annapolis different from when he left.

For one thing, his close friend and companion, Hilda Mae Snoops, is no longer by his side. Still mentally sharp, her health has been failing and she now lives in a Columbia retirement home. Mr. Schaefer visits every other day.

While in Annapolis, Mrs. Snoops often came under fire from local residents for her work renovating the governor's Georgian mansion, Government House. City preservationists raged when they learned Mrs. Snoops planned a bronze fountain for the mansion's grounds, fearing an atrocity would be erected.

In the end, the fountain was well-received and is now considered beautiful and tasteful.

"When I go by, I look at the fountain and I (think), 'Hilda Mae, you did that,'" Mr. Schaefer said, his eyes tearing up.

Despite the changes, Mr. Schaefer said he's looking forward to being back in Annapolis.

"There's nothing like public life," he said.