

# Schaefer's fund-raiser has observers guessing again

by Josh Kurtz

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BALTIMORE — One year ago, Louis L. Goldstein dropped dead, and William Donald Schaefer was re-born.

He re-entered the political scene as the self-anointed successor to Goldstein, putting his own successor, Gov. Parris N. Glendening, in a box.

Glendening wanted former U.S. Rep. Michael D. Barnes of Bethesda to become comptroller after Goldstein, but Schaefer, former governor and mayor of Baltimore, had to have his way. Glendening could only shake his head in wonder.

A few days later, Glendening appeared cheerfully at a Schaefer fund-raiser at a hotel in Baltimore. The two governors squinted into the glare of the TV lights and raised their arms triumphantly, looking to the world like a real team.

Schaefer's Baltimore-centric pals — who had watched gloomily as Glendening, the interloper from the Washington suburbs, reshaped the state government that they had once owned — were happy to have a piece of the action again.

"A sleeping giant has been awakened," Louis J. Grasmick, a Baltimore-area lumber company chief, said at the time.

Schaefer was elected easily. As comptroller, he has collected taxes, handed out rebates, awarded fat state contracts on the Board of Public Works and made occasional headlines by squabbling with Glendening.

But the newly awakened giant is still lumbering: the full return to glory has yet to happen.

So Schaefer and his friends decided to try again Thursday, with another fund-raiser in the very same hotel where they held the last big one 360

days ago.

This time, Parris Glendening wasn't there.

"I wasn't offended," Schaefer said in an interview. "I knew he wouldn't be here. I don't think he was invited."

Although the television cameras were also missing, there was still a certain electricity in the air.

Schaefer never did say why he was raising money. No one mentioned the office he currently holds. Should he decide to run for re-election as comptroller in 2002, he will be 81 years old.

But the City of Baltimore is choosing a new mayor this year, and William Donald Schaefer, who left city government a dozen years ago, is determined to inject himself into the middle of the campaign.

"To me, this is the most crucial election since, well, since I came out," Schaefer told 250 cheering supporters.

The two men in the 26-candidate field considered the likeliest to receive Schaefer's endorsement before the Sept. 14 Democratic primary for mayor, City Councilman Martin O'Malley and former city official Carl Stokes, were there, pressing the flesh and paying their respects. Both said they would be delighted to have Schaefer's blessing.

"I don't think there's a stronger endorsement in the city of Baltimore," O'Malley said.

"The governor" — with this crowd, Schaefer, not Glendening, is the governor — "is a very important part of Baltimore City, and many people remember the great things he did here," Stokes said.

Schaefer, who spent 31 years as mayor and city councilman, expressed concern for the communities of Baltimore. He fumed at an article in Thursday's Baltimore Sun that reported that a majority of lights on a busy downtown street were out. He bashed his successor as mayor, Kurt L. Schmoke.

"Nobody fixes the lights, 274 light bulbs out," he said. "That's wrong, that's wrong ... Motivate the city workers to have the sense of pride they once had."

Schaefer being Schaefer — that is, highly unpredictable — rumors ran rampant that he would say something important, or at least outrageous, about the mayor's race. Schaefer, being Schaefer, burst that balloon.

"Someone asked if I was going to say anything significant," he said. "I never have, so I don't think I will today."

He wanted to talk about the mayor's election and its impact on ... himself.

Last year, Schaefer appeared at the state elections office at the 11th hour to announce his candidacy for comptroller. On the filing deadline for mayoral candidates Tuesday night, Schaefer showed up at the city elections office just an hour before it closed, prompting speculation that he would run for mayor one more time. Even when he didn't file, his presence led the late-night news reports on Baltimore television.

"Every station carried it," Alan M. Rifkin, a former Schaefer aide and now a high-paid State House lobbyist, marveled to his old boss. "It wasn't who was running. It was you!"

"I did have fun the other night," Schaefer admitted.

And Schaefer being Schaefer, his 10-minute speech Thursday wandered all over the map, from Kosovo ("I worry about us building countries that we've destroyed"), to a prison riot he witnessed years ago ("It's the first time I've ever seen men raping each other. I don't know how to describe it"), to his dear friend Hilda Mae Snoops, who died last month ("I'm an old man. I shouldn't cry").

For all his eccentricities, Schaefer still commands a lot of loyalty, particularly among Baltimore-area business leaders and political players. The crowd that showed up Thursday was almost identical to the crowd that showed up last year. Grasmick was once again the emcee. His wife, Nancy, the state superintendent of schools, was once again one of the speakers paying tribute. The three Montgomery County politicians who journeyed up Interstate 95 for the fund-raiser last year — County Executive Douglas M. Duncan, state Sen. Christopher Van Hollen Jr. (D-Dist. 18) of Kensington and Del. Peter Franchot (D-Dist. 20) of Takoma Park

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— were the only three to show up Thursday.

"I asked the toll booth operator [at the Fort McHenry tunnel] where the Schaefer fund-raiser was, and she said, 'Exit 57,' " Franchot said, trying to illustrate Schaefer's appeal.

"These things are like reunions," said Van Hollen, who was Maryland's Capitol Hill lobbyist for part of Schaefer's eight-year term as governor.

Most of the top-grossing State House lobbyists were there — Rifkin, John Stierhoff, Gary Alexander, Dennis Rasmussen, Bruce C. Bereano. Bereano, who has just completed a sentence in a federal halfway house for a mail fraud conviction, was greeting people even more enthusiastically than usual.

And the talk wasn't just mayoral politics. The governor's race of 2002 was also on many people's minds. Lt. Gov. Kathleen Kennedy Townsend — whom Schaefer likes despite his mistrust of Glendening — was not there, but her top aide was. Baltimore County Executive Dutch Ruppertsberger was not there, but he sent his father, Al, a former county councilman, as his stand-in.

"Everybody's asking me if Dutch is going to run for governor," the elder Ruppertsberger told the crowd. "I don't know. But I did tell Dutch if you're going to run for higher office, you've got to lose weight. He's now lost 30 pounds."

Two other potential candidates, Duncan and Prince George's County Executive Wayne K. Curry, also made their presence felt.

When Louis Grasmick put out the word that Schaefer wanted to begin holding monthly problem-solving breakfasts around the state, as he did when he was governor, Duncan quickly volunteered to host the first, in October.

"We'll bring people there that you have never seen," Schaefer told Duncan.

Duncan smiled.