

# Schaefer gets back to business in Annapolis as state comptroller

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## Business notebook

Bernard Dagenais



**I**t was easy to get confused last week in Annapolis. A state government official took the podium to talk about the need to attract businesses to Maryland, the importance of keeping regulations in check and announced he would form a business-advocacy panel.

It sounded like the type of speech the state's new secretary of business and economic development would make. But the speaker was newly elected Comptroller William Donald Schaefer, who was already pushing at the edges of the box that defines his role as the state's top tax collector. As he tells it, a new voice for business has emerged whether Gov. Parris N. Glendening likes it or not.

"This is a very high priority of mine," Mr. Schaefer said in a telephone interview last week.

And Mr. Schaefer clearly won't be afraid to take on the governor when he deems it necessary.

Mr. Schaefer, who was governor from 1987 until Mr. Glendening replaced him in 1995, said he would like his fellow Democrat to appoint Lt. Gov. Kathleen

Kennedy Townsend and Secretary of Business and Economic Development Richard C. "Mike" Lewin to serve on his new panel. But if the governor withholds his blessing, "I'm going to do it anyway," Mr. Schaefer said.

It is not yet at all clear how the governor will react to having his predecessor second-guess him on business issues. Mr. Glendening's office did not respond when asked about the matter Friday.

Mr. Glendening, while he has boasted of the state's economic strength, has not catered to the business community. He has favored labor and environmental groups and he riled business leaders by withdrawing his long-

time support for the Inter-County Connector, which would provide a new link between Prince George's and Montgomery counties.

Mr. Schaefer said he has worked successfully with business leaders for years, favors the ICC and thinks the governor has shortchanged an important constituency.

"I've learned over the years when the business community unifies, you better listen," Mr. Schaefer said.

Champe McCulloch, president of the Maryland Chamber of Commerce, said Mr. Schaefer appears poised to provide a valuable service to the business community.

"I think it's not enough to say everything is great," Mr. McCulloch said. "You also have to be brutally honest with yourself and say 'this is what we need to fix.'"

Mr. McCulloch said the state's high wages, high land costs and high personal income taxes are disadvantages that need to be acknowledged and controlled for Maryland to remain competitive.

Mr. Schaefer, who spoke after being sworn into office a week ago, appeared to take a jab at one of Mr. Glendening's priorities — job training.

"An educated work force is meaningless without the promise of employment," Mr. Schaefer said.

His comments are in stark contrast to the role that Mr. Lewin, who was appointed secretary of business and economic development Nov. 23, seems to be taking as cheerleader.

Mr. Lewin said he welcomes Mr. Schaefer's input. "The advice of someone who knows so much about so many different layers of government is welcome," he said.

It might be wishful thinking, however, to think of the former governor as an advisor. Mr.

Schaefer has clout and isn't afraid to use it.

As Mr. McCulloch puts it, "Nobody tells the comptroller to pound sand."

• Bernard Dagenais is editor of *The Washington Business Times*.