

Smelser quitting politics

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UNION BRIDGE - The elder statesman of Frederick County politics, Sen. Charles Smelser, announced Wednesday he will retire from the General Assembly when his term expires next January.

Elected to two terms in the House of Delegates beginning in 1954, the 73-year-old Democrat suffered his only defeat in 1962 when he narrowly lost his first bid for the Senate. He came back to win four years later, however, and has served in the Senate ever since.

Among the present crop of 188 state lawmakers, Mr. Smelser is exceeded in seniority only by close Senate colleague Frederick Malkus, an Eastern Shore Democrat who after 48 years as a legislator is also retiring at the end of this term.

Mr. Smelser said "there's no particular reasons for leaving now, just a few things adding up."

He said he wants to have more time with his wife of 48 years, Betty, who has spent each winter alone conducting the business of their New Windsor Road farm while he conducted the business of the state in Annapolis.

And his secretary, Dottie Ross, who has handled his legislative work for 28 years, is ready for retirement herself, he said.

And finally, it was "the way I saw things going down there," he said. "I begin to see a lot of greed down there, especially in the big counties."

Mr. Smelser, known by family and friends as "Bus," has exerted a consistent, conservative and considerable influence on the General Assembly, particularly in fiscal and education matters.

"It's a case of government doing more for people now than was ever intended for it to do," he said. He cites the state's operating budget: \$474.5 million in fiscal 1956, his first budget, and \$13.5 billion in fiscal 1995, his last.

But, he said, "despite Maryland

being a liberal state and having a liberal legislature, we're fortunate to have enough moderate and conservative legislators to, when the chips were down, do the things we needed to do."

As a member of budget committees throughout his 36-year tenure, and more recently as chairman of the Senate Budget and Taxation capital budget subcommittee, he has pushed the legislative leadership to resist a government solution to every problem.

A number of his colleagues, including Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr., credit the former dairyman and decorated World War II bomber pilot with being largely responsible for saving the state's AAA bond rating, which allows it to borrow money for capital projects at the lowest possible interest rates. Maryland, one of just five states to hold the rating, nearly lost it during the three-year recession.

"His advice and counsel will be sorely missed," said Mr. Miller, who tried to convince him to stay. "It's the passing of an era."

"Charlie has been one of the few people in the legislature with the ability to say 'no,' especially to excessive capital projects," said