

Sen. Smelser declares he won't run

Conservative Democrat served 36 years in Annapolis

Carroll Co. Times
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5/5/94

Longtime Carroll legislator Sen. Charles H. Smelser will retire at the end of the year rather than seek an eighth term in the Maryland Senate.

Smelser, 73, who has served 36 years in the legislature, said his decision to retire was a natural one.

"There's an end to everything," said Smelser, a Democrat. "As far as an elective office, this is the end for me."

The Uniontown native leaves a conservative mark and a reputation as a senator stingy with taxpayers' money. "It means a great deal when people support you," said Smelser, who will also be retiring as chair of the Capital Budget Subcommittee.

Sen. Frederick C. Malkus Jr., D-Eastern Shore, called Smelser "the tightest man in the legislature."

Smelser has, since he began in politics, always served on the committee in charge of the money. For the past 28 years, he's served on the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee.

When he started in the mid 1950s, the state's capital budget was \$8 million. Today, it's \$380 million. The state's operating budget has increased from \$474 million in 1956 to \$13.5 billion in fiscal year 1995.

If people told Smelser the budget has grown too much during his tenure, he would tell them, "Think how big it'd be if I wasn't there," he laughed.

Sen. Julian L. Lapidés, D-Baltimore City, described Smelser as "one of the few people in Annapolis who is able to say 'No.'"

"Without him on the Capital Budget Subcommittee, I am petrified at what's going to happen to spending," Lapidés said.

Smelser has "saved citizens in the state untold millions" by being fiscally responsible, Lapidés said.

Smelser attended college at the University of Maryland at College Park and served as a B-17 fighter pilot in the Army Air Corps during World War II. After the war, he moved to Frederick County with his wife, Betty.

He started his legislative career as a Frederick County delegate in 1955. He was re-elected once to that position in 1958, but lost a shot at the Senate in 1962.

Four years later he came back, after dabbling in real estate, and won a seat representing Carroll and Frederick counties.

He hasn't left since, becoming a fixture in Annapolis.

"I'm shocked," said Del. Richard Matthews, R-Carroll, who has served with Smelser since 1967. Matthews remembered when Smelser and a Washington County senator played a key role in dissuading the government from building a prison at Springfield State Hospital more than 20 years ago.

"Charlie has been such a good friend to me," said Del. Donald Elliott, R-Carroll, who described Smelser as "competent, very respected, gentlemanly."

"Over the years (he's) been a mentor to me because it's his brand of conservatism, for the most part, that I've espoused," Elliott said. "He may have been a

Democrat, but with him it appeared the philosophy was paramount opposed to party."

It's that conservative philosophy that Smelser is proud of.

He said he has been fortunate to represent conservative, rural areas that correspond to his philosophy. For 30 years, Smelser and his wife ran a farm.

"I'd like to be remembered for having done the best that I could, that I was independent and tried to be honest," Smelser said. "I like to think that my constituents agreed with that because they kept returning me to office."

Smelser said his family has been very supportive of his decision not to run.

Betty Smelser predicted her husband will not slow down.

"He has just as many irons in the fire," she said. Smelser will continue as the president of the New Windsor State Bank.

Smelser said he would like to be remembered for his independence as a legislator.

"The mistakes I made were my own," Smelser said. "I didn't have anyone pulling my chain, that meant a lot to me."

Betty