

# Only one full-time farmer in legislature

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In a state where a farmer is embodied on the Great Seal and license plates are sold to support agriculture education, only one full-time farmer remains in the General Assembly.

Cabbage farmer and Senate Minority Leader J. Lowell Stoltzfus, R-Somerset, is the powerful remnant of the state's waning agricultural heritage.

"I feel agriculture is sometimes given short shrift," Mr. Stoltzfus said, but added that this administration and General Assembly works hard to understand the issues.

In 1985, the General Assembly contained eight people in agriculture. By 1990 the number had fallen to four, according to data from the Department of Legislative Services. Today, Mr. Stoltzfus stands as the lone man of the soil.

While Mr. Stoltzfus does point to several other legislators who are part-time or retired farmers, he said he thinks he is the only one whose income comes from farming. And, like farming, working in the Legislature is sometimes a lonely life.

"They work hard to understand agriculture, but really don't," Stoltzfus said. The General Assembly has a "much more urban-suburban atmosphere."

"It is tragic," said Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr., D-Calvert, of the loss of farmers, a group of people he called no-nonsense individuals.

"Having a farmer in the General Assembly helps promote good bills dealing with agriculture," Mr. Miller said.

Maryland's loss of farmer-legislators is consistent with national trends.

"There was time when really the legislature was dominated by agriculture interests and attorneys," said Tim Storey a senior fellow with the National Conference of State Legislatures.

"The time involved in being

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a legislator has increased substantially and that makes it tough to balance with certain professions. That makes it tough to be a farmer," Mr. Storey said.

"The nature of that occupation does not lend itself to taking big chunks of time and going to the legislature."

"Go back to the early days and people were in agriculture," said Mark Zuzik, Maryland Farm Bureau administrator, but now far fewer people are needed to run farms. Today, "agriculture is the No. 1 industry in Maryland and within that economy there is a tremendous amount of diversification."

But the shift is indicative of what is happening throughout the state.

"We no longer have the family physician in the community. We no longer have the country lawyer," Mr. Miller said.

According to 1990 U.S. Census information for Maryland, there are only 6,886 people who list their profession as farming, fishing and/or forestry. That accounts for just .3 percent of the employed civilian population over age 16.

By comparison, there are seven delegates or senators who list their profession as real estate, which is far more than three in 2000.

Sen. Larry E. Haines, D-Carroll, is a dairy farmer turned real-estate agent.

"My wife and I were working seven days a week, possibly 14 hours a day. The last year on the dairy farm, I made \$3,200. It is not much incentive to continue when you work that hard and there is very little fruit for your labor," Mr. Haines said. "It was an excellent decision

for me. I have had a very successful business."

But Mr. Haines said he retains "this strong sense and feeling for agriculture and farming." In fact, he said, early in his Senate career he ensured that more money was put aside to save farmland.

"Unless we save Maryland's farms from development we are going to have fewer farmers in the General Assembly and much bigger problems," said Dru Schmidt-Perkins, the executive director of 1,000 Friends of Maryland, which is an organization that opposes urban sprawl.

"Whether you are a farmer or not," Ms. Schmidt-Perkins said. "I would hope you would understand the importance of agriculture issues to the state on any number of levels."

"I was a farmer. I was in the House and Senate," said Lewis R. Riley, the state's Secretary of Agriculture. "I'm sitting on my tractor while I talk to you."

Mr. Riley said he is aware of how difficult it is for the few farmers to convince other legislators of their arguments.

"I think, on the other hand," he said, "we are fortunate we do still have a lot of people in the General Assembly that are urban dwellers who still have a lot of respect for the open space and what farmers do . . . both open space and food production."

Maryland and the General Assembly owe a great deal to the state's agricultural heritage.

"That is why those farmers were so smart they made the session in January and February when it was so cold," and not conducive to farm work, said Del. Joseph F. Vallario

Jr., D-Prince George's, "When the sun comes out and the trees start to bloom, we are out of here."

Maryland's 2005 90-day legislative session ended April 11.