



753 of 1020 DOCUMENTS

Copyright 2003 Daily Times (Salisbury, MD)
All Rights Reserved
Daily Times (Salisbury, MD)

January 5, 2003 Sunday

SECTION: LOCAL NEWS - COVER; Pg. 1

LENGTH: 826 words

HEADLINE: Senator in demand

BYLINE: Daniel Valentine

BODY:

SALISBURY -- A year ago, Senate Minority Leader J. Lowell Stoltzfus had trouble getting invited to meetings in the Democrat-controlled Maryland General Assembly.

Though he spent the last session warning that state spending was out of control, his colleagues voted to approve massive increases to education funds with dubious financial backing.

Last summer, Stoltzfus found himself arguing in state court over attempts by Gov. Parris N. Glendening to write him out of the Worcester and Somerset County district he had represented for nearly 10 years.

But in less than six months, the Lower Shore lawmaker has gone from a gadfly of Democrats to one of the state's most influential politicians with a new legislative session convening on Wednesday.

The Maryland Court of Appeals struck down Glendening's controversial redistricting plan in July -- a decision that surprised political figures across the state. The ruling essentially removed then-Wicomico County Councilman Philip Tilghman, Stoltzfus' expected Democratic opponent, from the 38th District race. Stoltzfus later cruised to victory over Salisbury lawyer Robert Marvel in the Nov. 5 election.

Stoltzfus's stature was elevated substantially following the election of Robert Ehrlich, who will be inaugurated later this month as Maryland's first Republican governor in more than 30 years.

With a friend and fellow Republican in charge of the state's executive branch, Stoltzfus is being called for his opinions and is now helping to

See STATUTE, Page A4

See STATUTE, Page A4

write Maryland's budget. Though Democrats still outnumber Republicans by a 2-to-1 ratio in the state Senate, Stoltzfus is no longer just minority leader -- he's the de-facto Senate liaison to the executive branch.

"It's been a pretty interesting year," said Stoltzfus, who spent the last month commuting to Annapolis for budget meetings and special appointments with Ehrlich.

"Everybody's calling now," he said.

Newfound influence

When Ehrlich was elected, the former congressman told supporters "our time in the wilderness is over."

But of all the GOP members in the state, none of them have welcomed the shelter as much as Stoltzfus.

"The transition team is bending over backwards to reach out to us," he said. "The rural areas as a whole can feel much better now. This is a governor that is going to understand."

Stoltzfus' newfound influence couldn't be more deserved, said state Sen. Larry Haines, a Carroll County Republican.

"Lowell is a man of very strong beliefs," he said. "I've always believed that if you're determined and do right, you will prevail. I'm delighted."

The most visible sign of Stoltzfus' new influence was his appointment last month to a special team creating the first Republican-controlled budget in Maryland in more than 30 years. Though Stoltzfus has served on the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee since 1999, this is the first time he has ever had a say in spending before the budget is released.

"We've just about finished it up," Stoltzfus said early last week. "It's a good budget, an honest budget. There's no fudging the numbers like we've seen before."

The appointment has also placed the Somerset County farmer in an envious position. Though most lawmakers must wait until the budget is unveiled Jan. 17, Stoltzfus knows what it contains and can plan for how to rally support.

His budget knowledge has made him a hot commodity with news reporters. On the day Stoltzfus spoke with The Daily Times, he'd already given interviews with reporters from The Washington Post, The (Baltimore) Sun and The Associated Press.

"I've been getting a lot more press," he said.

Stoltzfus has been tight-lipped about the budget, however. The spending plan could contain many controversial items, including a proposal to bring slot machines to state racetracks, cuts to many programs and agencies and several other austere measures to balance the state's projected \$1.3 billion deficit next year.

But the question that remains is how Stoltzfus can use the newfound influence. Though Republicans now control the executive branch, Democrats still dominate the legislature.

"Obviously, his stock has risen considerably since Ehrlich was elected," said Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller, a Prince George's County Democrat. "The Republicans are still a very small part of the Senate. If you need a bill to pass, you still need the Democratic votes."

It's a fact that worries Stoltzfus.

"A lot of it depends on how (the Democrats) respond in the legislature," he said.

Still, Miller said he believes Stoltzfus will handle the job well.

Senator in demand Daily Times (Salisbury, MD) January 5, 2003 Sunday

"He's a very conservative man, but he's not a barn-burner," Miller said. "The prayerful way he approaches the process is going to be a good moderating influence. ... What Lowell is known for is disagreeing with you in an agreeable manner."

* Reach Daniel Valentine at 410-749-7171, Ext. 320, or dvalentine@smgpo.gannett.com.

LOAD-DATE: February 3, 2003