

Strong Currie

P.G. senator takes place of Hoffman on key panel

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With Maryland facing a \$1.7 billion deficit, real potential for slot machine gambling and searching for other sources of revenue, the state Senate's **Budget and Taxation Committee** will be the focus of even more attention than usual in the 2003 **General Assembly** session.

Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr., D-Prince George's, placed that full plate in front of Sen. Ulysses Currie, D-Prince George's, when he announced the new **Senate leadership team** yesterday in Annapolis. Miller named five new chairmen after the Senate's leadership was decimated by elections and retirements.

Currie, a former principal and educator, has a personality that can bridge urban and rural regions and a strong relationship with Baltimore, which faces economic challenges similar to those in Prince George's County, Miller said. Baltimore officials are nervously watching legislative power shift to the Washington suburbs.

While reaction to the selections was generally positive, two items in particular surprised Annapolis observers.

First, the name widely mentioned as a replacement for Sen. Barbara A. Hoffman as chairman of the budget committee following her defeat in September's primary election had been Sen. Thomas M. Middleton, D-Charles.

Instead Middleton, a strong opponent of slot machines, was given control of the **Finance Committee**.

Miller delivered the second surprise when he said that if a slot machine bill came to the Senate it would go to the budget committee rather than to finance, a move likely explained by Middleton's position on the issue.

"We've had [slots] in Southern Maryland and we

had no economic development with the exception of slots and agriculture," Middleton said.

Slot machine legislation could make it through the Legislature, but the public would probably call for a referendum, Middleton said.

"Unless they can find a technical way to keep it from going to referendum, I think it's going," he said. If slots went that route, revenues would not appear until 2004 and 2005, he said.

However, Robert L. Ehrlich Jr., the governor-elect, is counting on slot revenues far in advance of that estimate as part of his plan to confront the state's deficit.

The issue is further complicated by the lingering uncertainty surrounding Speaker of the House Casper R. Taylor Jr., D-Allegany. He narrowly trailed LeRoy E. Myers Jr. after Tuesday's voting and remained in second place after a tally of absentee ballots yesterday. Taylor, who was expected to seek a recount, supported slot machines, and the future grows murky if he loses.

A bill on slot machines would likely be one of the first in the new session, Miller said, and those familiar with Currie said he has the ability and experience to handle that and other issues before the budget committee.

Bruce Bereano, a longtime Annapolis lobbyist, has known Currie since his first day in the House of Delegates in 1987.

As a delegate, Currie worked on both the **Ways and Means** and **Appropriations** committees before entering the Senate, where most recently he chaired the **Public Safety, Transportation and Environment subcommittee** on Hoffman's budget committee.

"His entire career in the Legislature is in that subject area," Bereano said. "He has all that experience."

"The way a committee is run completely reflects the personality of the chairman," Bereano said. Currie is "down to earth, warm, open and accessible," he added.

Robin Shaivitz, another lobbyist who has also known Currie since he was a freshman legislator, said he has always been open to new ideas and listens to everyone.

Speaking from experience, former Sen. Laurence Levitan, who ran the budget committee before Hoffman, said it's a lot of hard work, but when he thinks back to his days in the Legislature, he said, chairing a committee is one of the things he misses most.