



1 of 6 DOCUMENTS

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Md. Senator in FBI Investigation Is Known for Political Style Marked by Courtesy

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BODY:

In Prince George's, a county of turbulent, bare-knuckle politics, Uly Currie has always stood out: modest, likable, a dean of African American lawmakers in the Maryland Senate.

If anyone would succumb to the temptation to abuse public office, it would not be Currie, many of his colleagues said last week as they struggled to understand why the FBI would raid the home of the Prince George's Democrat in an investigation that involves his role as a consultant for a supermarket company.

"In a place that's sometimes viewed as a less-than-perfect political environment, Uly is far outside that," said Del. Barbara A. Frush (D-Prince George's), chair of the county's House delegation. "He's just high integrity."

The FBI took documents and other materials Thursday from Currie's District Heights home and the Lanham headquarters of Shoppers Food and Pharmacy, for which he has served as an outside consultant. Federal prosecutors are also seeking to subpoena documents and computer files from his Annapolis office. The company and Currie have declined to answer questions about his relationship with Shoppers, which he did not disclose in ethics filings. Currie did not respond to a request for comment Friday, and his lawyer has declined to comment.

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Yesterday, on his weekly radio show, former governor Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. called Currie a "gentleman" and "a good guy" and asked listeners to reserve judgment. "I would ask everyone to hold their water for a little bit," Ehrlich said on Baltimore's WBAL (1090 AM).

A sharecropper's son from North Carolina, Currie, 70, has risen to one of Maryland's most coveted seats of power, chairman of the Senate committee that oversees the \$31 billion state budget. Along the way, as a teacher, school principal and leader of his county's Head Start program, he shunned the spotlight but led instead through collaboration, his colleagues say.

Ulysses Currie is a son of the segregated South who picked tobacco in the fields of tiny Whiteville, N.C., and was the first in his family to go to college. To put himself through North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State College, he washed dishes and scrubbed floors at an all-white women's college in Greensboro. He served in the Army in the early 1960s and moved to Prince George's, returning to school at American University for a master's degree in education.

It was his work ethic that led Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr. (D-Calvert) to appoint Currie chairman of the Budget and Taxation Committee in 2002, eight years after Currie's election to the Senate. "It sent a message to the African American community that, 'Here's a person who's done everything right, worked hard and demonstrated leadership, and we're going to make him a leader,'" Miller said, describing the FBI investigation as "totally out of character with the man we know and love."

Currie, who also served eight years in the House, is among a handful of Senate leaders mentioned as possible successors to Miller, who appears to be reconsidering plans to retire in 2011.

Friends say Currie is a voracious reader who rises at dawn and plows through at least three national newspapers before morning floor sessions. He's an avid chess player, methodical and resilient, who reached out to Sen. Jamie B. Raskin (D-Montgomery) last year as soon as he heard that the freshman lawmaker shared his passion. In the thick of round-the-clock floor sessions as the General Assembly heads toward adjournment, Currie and Raskin steal away between votes to the castles and pawns on the chess table in Currie's office.

With his wife, Shirley, a preacher, returning to divinity school in recent years, Currie has taken on more duties rearing the son that the couple adopted 16 years ago and named for Aris T. Allen, a pioneering African American political leader and activist from Anne Arundel County. The couple also has an older son and two grandchildren.

Some lawmakers arrive in Annapolis every January with a briefcase full of ambitious bills. Not Currie. He works to steer spending to his district, but a passion for statewide policy has never seemed to drive him, his fellow senators say.

In part, they say, that's because his position as committee chairman requires him to pass a complex operating and capital budget, the one piece of legislation that must clear the General Assembly. Another part is that it's just his personal style, say friends and colleagues: Currie is neither aggressive nor flashy. He seldom speaks on the floor, sometimes swallowing his words when he does.

Yet he is passionate on some issues, reflecting concern for those whose voices are rarely heard. Two years ago, he rose to express his outrage over an exploding population of troubled teenagers that the state was sending to largely unregulated group homes. He has spoken out against payday loans, which he argued hurt the poor. And as the national move to abolish welfare took hold in Maryland in the late 1990s, he pushed for an innovative tax-credit program to encourage businesses to hire welfare recipients.

On the 15-member budget committee, one of the Senate's largest, Currie's approach to weighing competing priorities of Republicans and Democrats, of the state's rural, suburban and urban areas, is to herd his troops rather than control them.

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"He's not at all dictatorial in his manner," said Sen. Richard S. Madaleno Jr. (D-Montgomery), a committee member. "He's extremely deferential to all the members, especially to those with a minority point of view."

Yet his deference to committee members and to staff recommendations on spending leads some to privately question his effectiveness. The long power struggle between county and state officials over how to save the financially ailing Prince George's hospital system seemed to end this year with a new law setting up an independent authority to seek a new owner for the system.

But a tentative deal for a bailout had been struck a year before, only to unravel in the final minutes of the 2007 session. Some say Currie could have seen the deal through with more forceful leadership.

Staff writer John Wagner contributed to this report.

GRAPHIC: IMAGE; By Chris Gardner -- Associated Press; Prince George's Ulysses Currie (D) chairs the committee that oversees the state budget.

IMAGE; By Brendan Hoffman -- Associated Press; Reporters attempt to speak to someone Thursday at Ulysses Currie's home after an FBI raid, part of an investigation involving Currie's role as a consultant to a supermarket company.

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