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A CONVERSATION WITH : MARTIN G. MADDEN

BODY:

Maryland Senate Minority Leader Martin G. Madden spoke recently at The Sun with Richard C. Gross, editor of the Opinion / Commentary page, about some of the issues facing the state's Republican Party in the 2001 session of the legislature.

What's the No. 1 challenge for the Republican minority in the State House in this legislative session?

Our No. 1 priority is to bring some sensibility to the growth of the state budget. It has been growing at a record rate. We think it's growing too fast and that we're setting ourselves up for a massive tax increase, our programs (being) cut or both. So we will be the fiscal watchdogs of Annapolis in the 2001 session.

What kinds of plans do you have, if any, for tax relief that might come up in the next session?

We have no specific plans at this time. However, we are talking, as a caucus of Republican senators, of endorsing an idea that would make permanent the one-time, tax-free clothing exemption that we have coming up this August. We would like to see that extended year-round. The price tag is approximately \$ 138 million.

What are some of the other issues that the Republicans want to bring up?

We would be looking at the criminal justice system, the whole area of parole and probation, as well as good-time credits. We will also be looking at, perhaps, campaign finance reform -- whether we can do something in that area.

Do you see in the current problems with the criminal justice system as an opportunity to confront the Democratic majority?

There (are) a lot of problems with the system to the extent that one particular person has been in charge of this and responsible for this, and we certainly point that out. What we want to do is make the system better, (find) loopholes that we can close, within the available resources. Then try to be a voice for long-term solutions. If that means elimination of many areas of parole, then that necessarily means that you have to build more prisons.

But, certainly, we want to accomplish things (in Annapolis), and if we have to put certain persons on the spot, we will do so.

What about transportation? Are there ideas that the Republicans have that you would like to bring up?

We have some real long-term concerns. We're still searching for the answers. The basic problem, from my personal feeling -- not a caucus position -- is that we are trying to fund, exclusively from one dedicated source of transportation funds, two mass transit systems. We should allow general fund dollars to also compete, to be used for transportation projects, as a solution to addressing some of our short-term needs.

GRAPHIC: Photo(s), Maryland Senate Minority Leader Martin G. Madden, SUN FILE

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