

Billings rips Taylor over new assignment

*Nine delegates switch
in State House shuffle*

by Josh Kurtz

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ANNAPOLIS — Del. Leon G. Billings on Wednesday blasted Speaker of the House Casper R. Taylor Jr. and other House leaders, calling his reassignment from the House Environmental Matters Committee to the House Appropriations Committee "punitive."

"It is an almost unprecedented action by the speaker to punish a delegate who has opposed him publicly on his public policy positions," he said.

Billings (D-Dist. 18) of Kensington had particularly harsh words for House Majority Leader John A. Hurson (D-Dist. 18) of Chevy Chase, his longtime friend and running mate, calling him "an active participant" in "a political mugging."

Billings is the chief Democratic critic of House Democratic leaders, needling the leadership team about everything from its conservatism to its lack of diversity to its coziness with high-paid lobbyists and the special interests they represent. While Billings said several weeks ago that he expected to be removed from Environmental Matters because of his opposition to the deregulation of the electric utility industry and other measures favored by Taylor, his latest diatribe against House leaders is his harshest to date.

Taylor (D-Dist. 1C) of Cumberland completed the annual game of presession musical chairs earlier this week, announcing nine new committee or leadership assignments.

Del. Peter Franchot (D-Dist. 20) of Takoma Park received the subcommittee chairmanship he wanted. He is moving from chairman of the House Appropriations public safety and administration subcommittee to chairman of the Appropriations transportation and environment subcommittee.

Billings and two other Montgomery lawmakers were involved in what amounts to a three-way trade. Hurson will move from the House Ways and Means Committee to take Billings' seat

on Environmental Matters. Del. Henry B. Heller (D-Dist. 19) of Rockville will move from Appropriations to Ways and Means.

Ironically, Hurson and Heller traded places after the 1996 session, with Heller assuming Hurson's slot on Appropriations, and Hurson moving to Ways and Means.

These switches are part of a broader — but still modest — shakeup that moves Del. Joan Cadden (D-Dist. 31) of Brooklyn Park into Franchot's old sub-

committee chairmanship and makes Del. Sue Hecht (D-Dist. 3) of Frederick Franchot's vice chairwoman on transportation, among half a dozen other changes. As the only Democrat in the Frederick County delegation, Hecht's new job is the closest thing to a leadership post that anyone from the county has had in recent years.

"This is an important appointment for Frederick because transportation affects so many facets of our lives," she said.

From a policy standpoint, Franchot's switch is the most significant for Montgomery County. Montgomery leaders say Franchot's new assignment is a coup for the county because transportation projects — and funding — loom so large on its priority list.

"The issues are revenues, revenues, revenues," Franchot said.

But it is Billings' move to Appropriations that may have the bigger political implications — and could provide the most entertainment for State House observers.

In a letter Taylor faxed to Billings earlier this week, the speaker said he was assigning Billings to Appropriations "in light of your special interest in the budget." There was no word about political payback.

But Billings clearly drove the chairman of Environmental Matters, Del. Ronald A. Guns (D-Dist. 36) of Elkton, crazy. One of the legislature's leading environmentalists, Billings is a master at killing or stalling legislation he opposes, and during the last session he asked pointed questions of Guns and other officials who were promoting deregulation, which big corporations were pushing.

Now Billings moves to Appropriations, where the chairman, Del. Howard P. Rawlings (D-Dist. 40) of Baltimore, is Billings' equal in intellect, toughness and tactical maneuvering, Rawlings — accused occasionally by critics of being dictatorial — said he looked forward to working with Billings.

"He's going to be an asset to our committee," Rawlings said. "He's got superb experience on Capitol Hill (Billings worked for Edmund S. Muskie for several years and still lobbies the federal government). He'll certainly raise a lot of issues. We're looking to work collaboratively with him."

In keeping with his self-styled Dr. No image, Billings routinely votes against bond bills — the "pork" legislation that must pass through Appropriations before being considered by the full legislature.

"That's all right," Rawlings said. "We have 27 other members who do [vote for bond bills]."

Another question is whether Billings will become an advocate for Montgomery County's funding interests in Annapolis the way most other Montgomery members of the legislature's budget committees are.

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"Leon brings his style, reputation and skills to Appropriations," said Richard Madaleno, a lobbyist for the Montgomery County government. "Leon is an incredibly hard fighter and

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could bring a refreshing perspective to Appropriations.”

Madaleno predicted that Billings would alert his colleagues to wasteful spending around the state.

“Leon asks the hard questions that other people aren’t always willing to ask,” he said.

Billings said his mission in Annapolis will not change because of his new assignment.

“I will continue to fight for progressive principles and against abuse of process,” he said. “And I will continue to serve the people of District 18 to the best of my ability. My committee assignment is secondary to the exercise of that responsibility.”

But Billings suggested that his alliance with Hurson might be irreparably damaged. He said it would be impossible for him and Del. Sharon M. Grosfeld (D-Dist. 18) of Kensington, another left-wing insurgent, to run as a team with Hurson in 2002, as they have in the past.

The dispute once again highlights the fine line Hurson must walk between his responsibilities as majority leader and his duties representing one of the most progressive legislative districts in the state.

“As majority leader, he has been silent, if not publicly ambivalent, on those issues which would put him in conflict with his speaker,” Billings said. “I can only assume that not only was he a party to this political mugging but, by the fact of his reassignment to the environment committee, he was an active participant in it.”

Hurson said it was far too early to discuss whether any political alliances have been damaged.

“Leon has always been my friend and will continue to be my friend,” he said.