

MICHAEL BUSCH

Maryland's Speaker of the House of Delegates

Cold rain bit at every exposed inch of flesh as we climbed the 26 marble steps to the Maryland Statehouse, where, on January 3, the day before his 56th birthday, Annapolitan Mike Busch had pretty well finished unpacking boxes as he moved into his new digs. And elegant digs they are — once you make your way through the security checkpoint through which, in the wake of 9/11, all who enter here must pass.

Ceilings rise not quite sky-high to the rotunda in this, the oldest working statehouse in America, where George Washington truly did visit. Walls are warm in taupe with yellow undertones, and mahogany paneling up to the chair rail is polished to a fingerprint-free gleam. On a sunnier day, afternoon sunlight would stream in from soaring windows.

There are advantages to being speaker of the Maryland House of Delegates.

But one of them isn't having extra tickets to the swearing in of the new Assembly, so people calling in hopes of reserving a seat in the small gallery that overlooks the action on the House floor are disappointed.

Disappointment is a condition the new speaker of the House prefers to avoid. Empowerment is his style. But even so finessed a consensus-builder as Michael Busch can't change the capacity of this 18th-century capitol — or the size of the \$1.8 billion deficit that's the gorilla on the back of this Assembly.

Since we spoke, the Assembly has come to order, and Mike Busch is no longer speaker-elect but speaker. That title gives him rein over the flow of legislation in the new General Assembly, which is likely to be one of the most fiercely waged sessions in recent memory, given Maryland's budget travails, its first Republican governor in decades and the allure of slot machine revenues as a cure-all.

As the most powerful office-holder in Annapolis to question the wisdom of legalized gambling, Busch's persuasive skills will be tested in the next three months, longer, if legislators can't settle their business in the prescribed 90 days, an early prediction in some quarters.

Here's a preview to how he'll conduct the business of state — which in Maryland is really the business of the people, for, as our state Constitution says, "all Government of right originates from the People."

BW How has becoming speaker changed your life — besides bringing you a new title and a new office?

MB It's been a very substantive change. All of a sudden, you go from being appointed committee chair to replacing Speaker Cas Taylor, who has been a longtime mentor and friend. The reality is that now I'm in charge of 140 House members and the legislation that goes through it and the interaction with the state Senate and the governor.

One-third of the House is brand hew, and you have new committees under your jurisdiction with quite a few people moved around and the daunting task of a \$1.8 billion total deficit.

It's a challenge. You try to take the experience that you have and some of the insight that you've received from your colleagues and take a direction for the upcoming session and the four-year legislative term.

BW We hear a great deal about this \$1.8 billion deficit. Is it really that much different than states elsewhere are facing?



MB In the national recession, 46 states are running deficits. Maryland is in pretty good shape. We're one of seven states with a triple-A bond rating, and we have good fundamentals to our revenue structures.

We've just completed a 10-percent income tax rate reduction that removed \$750 million a year from our general fund. In hindsight, we'll probably look back and think 'Why did we do that?' It's been effective for 50 or 60 years, so why did we change it?

So there are a lot of good things as we're trying to fight through some tough economic times.

BW We wonder why it didn't come through in the campaign that so many states have the same problem ...

MB In retrospect, three things hurt the [former] lieutenant governor. First, the previous governor was very unpopular with the general populace. Second, Kathleen Kennedy Townsend couldn't define herself during the election. Third, her campaign never got off the ground.

If you can't get out there and articulate your issues, your opponent or the press will start to define you, and that's what happened. The issues of a looming deficit and reckless spending drove the debate — and a lack of confidence, I believe, in the Democratic candidate.

BW And that's part of the story of how you come to be speaker of the House ...

MB The short version is that, unfortunately, Cas Taylor lost his election.

Editor's note: Casper Taylor had represented Allegany County since 1979 and had been speaker of the House since 1994, until he was unseated this year by LeRoy Ellsworth Myers by less than one percent of the vote.

In some respects, I was always looked upon as the speaker-in-waiting. However it was the last thing on my mind on election day that Cas could actually lose.

It was very close. We were on the phones from 11:30 at night till 1:30 the next morning. Then I got up at 6 the next morning, looked at the ceiling until 7AM and then went downstairs and started calling people and started lining up votes.

As we waited for the recount and realized Cas would not win re-election, I garnered the support of many of the leaders and the rank and file. Within 24 or 48 hours, I had the support of the Democrats in the General Assembly as their nominee.

BW People in Anne Arundel County have known you since 1987 as their delegate. Now their delegate is going to be their speaker. What is this going to mean for Anne Arundel County?

MB I'm proud to be the first speaker from Anne Arundel County since Oliver Miller — a great man, though I did not know him personally — in 1867.

Obviously, it benefits Anne Arundel County. I like to think I've advocated for my district throughout my career. As speaker, I have greater input and access to projects. But this year we've more worries than local initiatives. The budget is the number-one issue in front of us. It will take priority over everything.

Gambling is like a trick play. It's not a direct revenue source, and it's funded off a portion of society that can least afford it.

BW *There's a sense by many voters that the Democratic Party has let them down — that the party has strayed from its roots and no longer represents working people. As a leader now, how do you plan to address those concerns?*

MB I think locally as well as nationally, the Democrats have had a tough time defining themselves since Bill Clinton's presidency. How do we address that? Government's there to help them, not necessarily as a full-time crutch, but to help them have the resources to meet the American dream. I think government is a good thing, providing many services to help people improve their lives. I think that's what this country is based on. I think we go back to creating opportunity germane to everyday working people.

BW *As we have watched the gambling debate across the country, we've seen casino boats and full-fledged gambling in states that 10 years ago were where Maryland is at this moment. Is gambling a slippery slope?*

MB From my point of view, it is. It tends to distract you from the real issue of substantively addressing your priorities with legitimate revenues affected by taxes or fees. I think it's part of the empowerment of people going to polls that they know exactly where their funding is going.

Gambling is like a trick play. It's not a direct revenue source, and it's funded off a portion of society that can least afford it.

BW *What do you mean? That gambling is a regressive tax that takes a disproportionate toll from the poor?*

MB Sure it is. I don't think many people out in suburbia care if there are slots or not because they're not going to use them. Blue-collar people and a lot of people in urban areas are likely to rush there for their entertainment dollar, and some of the social costs are going to come back to the state in emotional and financial repair of individuals and families.

BW *With the gambling train seemingly coming down the track in Maryland, what role will you be playing as the legislation is crafted?*

MB As speaker, I want to give all the members the maximum amount of information so that they can make reasoned decisions. The new governor is already committed to some form of gaming expansion through slots, predicated at race tracks.

There are numerous questions involved in that. What is the enrichment that will take place for owners with government basically subsidizing the industry? What is the goal to the state in terms of what they expect to reap from it? What benefits or shortcomings does it have for the industry?

We're trying to get that information together. But I think everybody has pretty much a gut feeling to gambling being owned and run by the state of Maryland. Fairly soon, you become dependent on those revenues.

BW *Are you going to tell members of your caucus that gambling is a regressive tax that sometimes distorts priorities?*

MB More so than that, you try to say this is what legislation does, this is the effect it will have on industry you're trying to supplement, this is the effect it will have on the economy. Are you getting your fair share or have we given too much of the fiscal outlay to the owners?

It's a profitable business or people who have no interest in racing would not be coming in here and buying up racetracks.

There are numerous questions. Why do slot machines and casino-like gambling have to be located at race tracks? Are the revenues real or a one-time aberration that you're trying to desperately get in a budget session? Those are the kinds of questions we'll be asking.

BW *Governor Ehrlich opposes a vote by the people on gambling. Do you think there should be a referendum?*

MB I think traditionally what happens in Maryland and what should take place is that elected representatives should vote. But they should have the right to take gambling to referendum if they have a strong enough feeling. People should have the right to hold legislative decisions to a referendum call.

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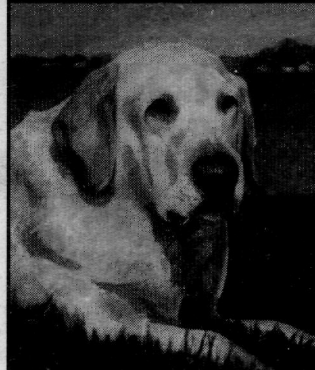
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BW Do you think there'll be a legislative effort to put this on the ballot?

MB I think there'll be numerous different revenue bills coming in.

BW Would you support a referendum?

MB On first blush, I tend to think we should not have slots. As a last resort, I would support letting people make up their minds. In general, I'm not a supporter of expanded gaming. I think you've got to look at problems straight on and do it with more conventional revenue sources.

BW We've heard you described as a pal of Gov. Ehrlich. Tell us about that relationship ...

MB Actually, we're pretty good friends. We came here together 16 years ago and served on the same committee. We have many common interests. We both played sports, went to college and played football, him at Princeton and me at Temple University. We had fairly successful careers in sport and college. We came to the General Assembly in the same year. He's 10 years younger than I am, and he's a very talented guy.

When Bob first came to the House, we felt sorry for him. There were 17 Republican members out of 148. Everybody felt his career had been capped in the General Assembly. Eight years later, he won a seat in Congress by one of the largest majorities of freshman congressmen. So he's very substantive and not to be underestimated.

'I think coaching really teaches you how to deal with people, to motivate people and get the best out of them.'

I hope for the citizens of Maryland and for Bob himself it turns out to be an experience that works out.

BW Do you see Bob Ehrlich as a right-leaning ideologue, as some have portrayed him? Or is he the moderate that he portrays himself?

MB In some ways it's amorphous. When he was here, he was a moderate. When he went to Washington, he fell in with the Newt Gingrich brigade. He kind of reinvented himself for this election, too. He's a bipartisan man for all seasons.

BW One of the trial balloons from his transition team recommended merging Department of Natural Resources and the Department of the Environment. Do you think this is a good idea?

MB First, you have to see the specifics. In the 16 years I've seen, three governors all tried to consolidate agencies or divide them. So I've seen a lot of different things. Obviously they're looking for economies of scale in downsizing.

BW You're considered an environmental ally. Are there some issues related to the Chesapeake Bay that will be in the forefront this session?

MB I think the resources of the Bay, whether oysters, crabs or rockfish, are important. I think the Bay is not only a great resource but also an economic engine. We should be able to take advantage of the great things that can be done recreationally and professionally on the Bay as well as it's being a real jewel for those who just like to sit back and look at it a bit.

BW You were an athlete. Are you still a sportsman? Do you have any special connections with Chesapeake Bay?

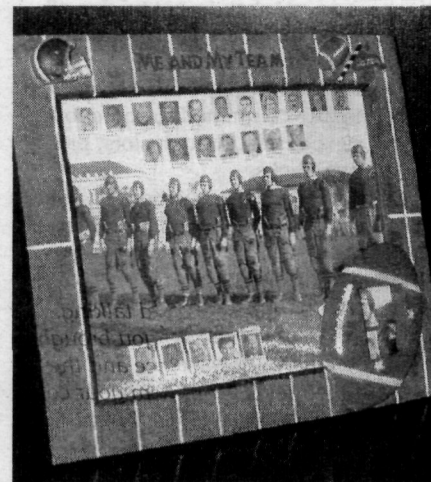
MB I'm not really a sailor. I'm more grounded in other sports — football, basketball and lacrosse. But I certainly enjoy the Bay, and as I've gotten older I've gained more and more respect for the Bay and the watershed.

BW When you're not being speaker, who are you?

MB In ordinary life, I'm a father and have a loving wife, Cindy, and two wonderful little girls, Erin and Megan, seven and four, who are the twin-kle in daddy's eye.

I also work for Anne Arundel County. I've been there close to 25 years, as deputy to the director of the Recreation and Parks Department. I started out as a history teacher. I went to high school at St. Mary's, graduated in 1965, came back and taught there from 1973 to 1979 — taught and also coached football and basketball.

I had a great time there, but the Sisters of Notre Dame kept me in line, though I gave them a challenge from time to time.



MB In the House, I think we've positioned ourselves to be more environmentally friendly than in previous sessions. We had a conservative chairman in the House Environmental Matters Committee in Ronald Guns, and I think that frustrated a lot of members of the Democratic party who wanted to be more progressive on the environment. Now I think we're going to have a chance to do that as we contrast ourselves with Bob Ehrlich.

BW What Bay issues might come up in this Assembly?

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Governor Ehrlich is kind of amorphous. He's a bipartisan man for all seasons.'

BW What is it about coaching? In Washington, House Speaker Dennis Hastert is a former wrestling coach ...

MB I loved coaching. I coached football, coached basketball. When I got elected, I'd probably coached or thrown every kid in the county out of a game.

I think coaching really teaches you how to deal with people, to motivate people and get the best out of them. You know what makes people perform and how they progress. And if you can empower people that way, I think they appreciate it when it comes time to put themselves out there.

BW How do those skills carry over to this grand and powerful office?

MB I like to think I was successful and tried to accommodate people and make the appropriate decisions for what I thought was the best interest of everybody. Unfortunately, there are some things you have to put your foot down on. But in general, I try to empower people, to give them as much information as I can.

I have this inherent belief that the vast majority of people are here for all the best reasons. They're community leaders, and you don't fool the public too many times. You get yourself elected, and you come to Annapolis and try to resolve problems. I think if you give them the right information and enough information,

they'll make the right decision the majority of times.

The problem is, you're always battling the special interests that come in here and try to cloud the issues.

BW So your style is founded on knowledge for empowerment?

MB Yes. I do that because I'm a consensus builder.

BW When we started talking, you said what you brought to this job was your experience and the insight that you've gained from your colleagues. Who are the people who've empowered you?

MB I've had a lot of mentors. My parents. My former coach. The former mayor of Annapolis Pip Moyer.

Bob Pascal, former county executive and appointment secretary to William Donald Schaefer, was one of them. I used to marvel how well he did at resolving problems face to face with individuals. He had the unique ability to tell people no and they'd still respect him.

Over the last 16 years, the toughest of times have been made enjoyable and fun by John Astle, our senator from Anne Arundel County. He's been a great supporter and a great partner here in the General Assembly.

And Cas Taylor. He was a great man and a great mentor to me. I wish he was still here.

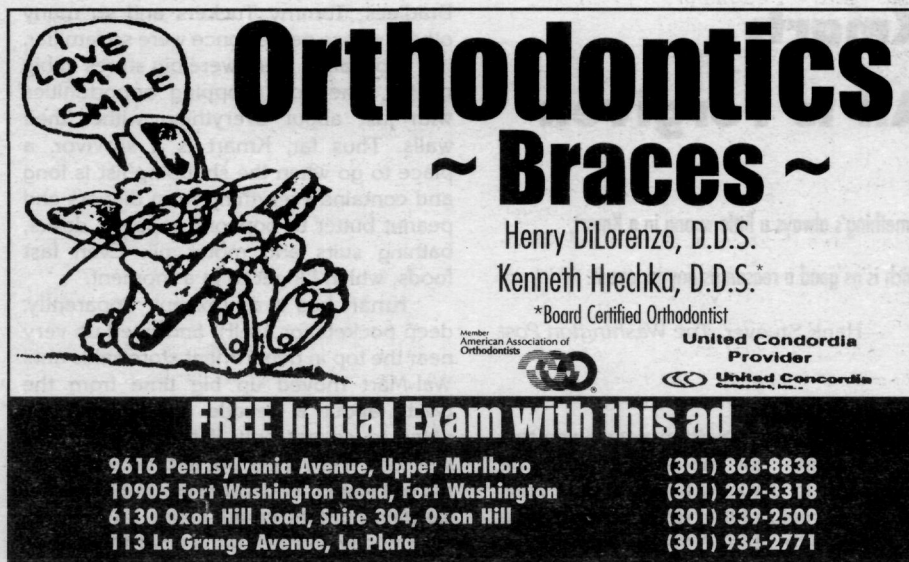


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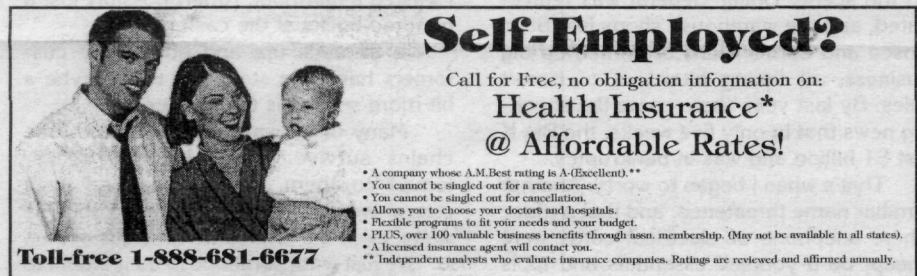
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