

Busch calls for cooperation on first day of session

Bills deal with early voting, eminent domain

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A cordial, festive atmosphere marked the start of the 423rd session of Maryland's General Assembly yesterday, with House Speaker Michael E. Busch asking delegates to put aside election-year differences and work on an agenda that includes stricter clean-car standards and reducing the ranks of Marylanders lacking health insurance.

Legislation already on the agenda includes Senate measures allowing early voting in elections and making it tougher to seize property through eminent domain.

Other bills would deny drivers' licenses to illegal immigrants and protect state workers from being fired for political reasons.

Of the 188 state legislators, 137 are Democrats. The party gained five seats in the House to outnumber Republicans by 2-to-1, and Democrats make up a three-quarters majority in the Senate. Republican Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. also lost to Democrat Martin O'Malley.

Still, the coming session won't be without controversy, whether within the Democratic Party or between the two parties.

At a breakfast meeting with reporters, Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller, D-Calvert, threw cold water on the idea that revenue-raising measures would lead to expanded government programs.

"I don't like the idea of tax, tax, tax, spend, spend, spend," he said.

On the other hand, Mr. Miller

spoke approvingly of slot machine legislation, which he has supported for the last four years. This year, he said, might be the session to finally get it passed.

"I'd like to do it right now, sooner rather than later. You kill the snake while you got the hoe in the hand," he said.

With no objections, the 141-member House of Delegates re-elected Mr. Busch, D-Annapolis, by voice vote to serve as speaker for the fifth consecutive year.

Mr. Miller won another term as Senate president.

It was a departure from last year, when Republicans upset with Democratic actions in the House voted against Mr. Busch. He still won the speakership on a 95-34 vote.

During the election, "many of us wore our party affiliation on our sleeve," Mr. Busch said. Now, he said "delegate" is their most important label.

Mr. Busch said he hoped the assembly could move forward on:

- Repairs for aging schools. Mr. O'Malley has pledged \$400 million for school construction.

- Helping the estimated 750,000 Marylanders without health insurance. Mr. Busch set a goal of reducing that number by half this year.

- Restoring the Chesapeake Bay's oyster population. Mr. Busch noted that a century ago, oysters were so plentiful that they could filter the bay in three to four days. Today, he said, it takes an entire year.

- Enacting stricter car emission standards. Mr. Busch said he wants Maryland to have the cleanest car emissions in the mid-Atlantic states.

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• Promoting the use of alternative energy sources, such as wind, and ensuring that energy is transmitted as cheaply as possible.

Del. Don Dwyer Jr., R-Glen Burnie, was pleased with Mr. Busch's remarks.

"I'm anxious to see whether or not there will be a spirit of cooperation," said Mr. Dwyer, who voted against Mr. Busch for speaker last year.

The House chamber was packed as delegates took the oath of office. Those in attendance included County Executive John R. Leopold, who served in the House for 20 years, as well as Mayor Ellen O. Moyer and retired U.S. senator Paul Sarbanes.

Mr. O'Malley appeared in the House and Senate, drawing warm applause from both chambers.

"Progress is bipartisan, and I'm looking forward to working with all of you," he told the Senate.

A former delegate from Prince George's County, Lt. Gov.-elect Anthony Brown told new delegates they'll be in for the ride of their lives.

School's back

Yesterday's proceedings felt like a cross between the start of school and college graduation.

"It's kind of like going back to college, freshman year," said first-term Sen. Bryan Simonaire, R-Pasadena, who brought six of his seven children.

The family of Del. Nic Kipke, R-Pasadena, was well-represented — Mr. Kipke's wife, father, stepmother, grandparents, two brothers and sister were on hand.

Morgan Kipke said she's been warned to expect to see less of her husband for the next three months. But she's not sitting at home. She'll be active in the community and volunteer at schools.

Yesterday was a more routine affair for Mr. Dwyer, who's serving his second four-year term.

"After being here four years and understanding how it works, it's not as exciting," he

said. "At the same time, it's an incredible honor and an incredible responsibility to represent the people of Maryland."

Big issues

Lawmakers are usually reluctant to make any big decisions in the first session after an election. Many are just getting used to life in the State House.

Nonetheless, health insurance, clean-car legislation, a ban on smoking in bars and restaurants and the future of Maryland's death penalty all loom as major issues. Locally, the county's assembly delegation will take on the process for selecting the school board and panhandling restrictions.

Del. Ron George, R-Arnold, is taking up the fight of his predecessor, Herb McMillan. A bill sponsored by Mr. George would prevent the state from issuing drivers' licenses to those who can't prove they're legally allowed in the United States.

Mr. George said he's sponsoring the bill in part for security reasons. With the federal Real ID Act taking effect in 2008, he's concerned that there will be a surge of illegal immigrants applying for licenses. If the bill passes, employers will also be able to check licenses to see whether potential employees are legal, Mr. George said.

Sen. Ed DeGrange, D-Glen Burnie, is sponsoring a bill requiring a government agency to make specific findings before private property can be condemned and transferred to a private party for economic development purposes.

The bill is identical to legislation that passed the Senate last year. Mr. DeGrange said it's important to protect businesses, especially those that rent their buildings, from eminent domain abuses.

"There are certain areas that need to be revitalized," Mr. DeGrange said. "But this (bill) makes certain that (the public is) getting fair treatment."

Senate Democrats are sponsoring two bills on subjects that provoked much partisan furor last year.

One concerns a constitutional

amendment for early voting, allowing voters to cast ballots before Election Day.

Democrats say early voting allows more people to participate in the democratic process. But many Republicans worry that it could lead to fraudulent elections, and accuse Democrats of using it as part of a power grab.

The other bill would protect state workers from political firings. A special committee of senators and delegates last year investigated whether executive branch employees were fired because they were Democrats.

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