

Chamber honors Busch, Belcher

Capital 6-3-05

By DAVID E. LEIVA
Staff Writer

House Speaker Michael E. Busch, the Democratic leader who proved to be a thorn in Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr.'s business agenda during this year's General Assembly, received the top legislator honor last night from the Annapolis and Anne Arundel County Chamber of Commerce for "his unwavering political leadership."

The award, a snub of the Republican governor's call for businesses to support his proposals, was the exclamation point on a tumultuous relationship between the two elected officials that engrossed much of this year's session.

"The chamber works hard to advocate on legislation and regulatory decisions that affect our local businesses," chamber Chairman Richard J. Morgan told attendees at the annual business awards gala. "However, the decision on who receives this award is not solely based upon an individual's performance on business legislation."

Mr. Busch, D-Annapolis, was one of 17 business leaders and organizations honored at the sold out event held at the Annapolis Marriott Waterfront Hotel, including John M. Belcher, chairman and chief executive of ARINC Inc., who was named Business Leader of the Year by the chamber and *The*

Capital.

Although awards were given for community outreach, top developer and nonprofit organization of the year, the choice of Mr. Busch over other legislators was met with a standing ovation by the crowd.

Mr. Busch said he has collaborated with the business community on important issues such as the selection process for the school board and more state aid for school construction. He also helped get a bill passed to alleviate the medical malpractice crisis facing doctors.

"There's other things that are involved in being a legislator. That's leadership, integrity and community commitment," he said. "I think people who

have known me see me as a problem solver."

Mr. Morgan, who emceed the event, said his group chose to recognize Mr. Busch for "pursuing a balanced and pragmatic approach to finding solutions that will benefit all citizens."

Last summer, Mr. Ehrlich demanded that businesses step up in state politics and "get dangerous" by pinning down delegates and senators who failed to pass a business-friendly litmus test.

The Maryland Chamber, who earlier picked Sen. James DeGrange as its top lawmaker, responded by creating a political action committee to defeat legislators who did not score at least 50 percent on a scorecard compiled by Maryland Business for Responsive Government.

No Democrats had reached the minimum score of 80 after the 2004 session, and Mr. Busch scored 20.

This morning, Maryland Chamber officials said it didn't see Mr. Busch's selection as a snub by the Annapolis group.

"It's a chamber honoring one of its local legislators," said Maryland Chamber spokesman William Burns. "We wouldn't want to misread that as a shot to the chamber."

The Annapolis and Anne Arundel Chamber split from the state chamber for fear that public stands on political issues and elected officials might create a backlash and consumer boycotts.

Then as the sentiment picked up that Mr. Ehrlich might have slots passed, Mr. Busch successfully thwarted that effort and, ultimately, created a stalemate that caused its defeat.

Later, the Democrat oversaw successful legislation that closed corporate tax loopholes, increased the minimum wage and taxed large companies that failed to provide enough health coverage — all labeled

anti-business. Mr. Ehrlich has vetoed some of the measures, although lawmakers can try to override them when they return to Annapolis in January.

Business leader

Mr. Belcher, who was out of town on business, was selected for his company's accomplishments.

In the last seven years, ARINC's revenues have more than doubled, going from \$300 million to more than \$700 million — a product of diversification. The company, which has six divisions, has more than 3,000 employees worldwide, about 1,200 of them in Parole.

While ARINC expects to have \$1 billion in revenue by next year, until Mr. Belcher took over the reigns, its low profile for many years placed a mysterious fog over the business founded to help the airline industry.

"We were very quiet and had many people who thought we were affiliated with the CIA," said Linda Hartwig, a company spokesman who accepted the award on Mr. Belcher's behalf.

dleiva@capitalgazette.com

Staff Writer David Abrams
contributed to this report.

The Annapolis and Anne Arundel County Chamber of Commerce last night presented awards to:

- Col. John W. Ives — The installation commander at Fort George G. Meade was recognized as for creating business partnerships with area companies.
- Janice Hayes-Williams of Legacy Promotions for community outreach.
- Corporate Office Properties Trust as top developer.
- VasTech Inc., as the emerging business.

Cont.

- Gavin Buckley and the West Village Group for efforts to revitalize inner West Street.

- Anne Arundel Community College for national achievement.

- Friends Foundation for its philanthropic work.

Last night also marked the inaugural year of the Comcast Business Hall of Fame. Eight business people were inducted.

- Wilfred T. Azar, commercial property owner and longtime board member of North Arundel Hospital.

- Ralph W. Crosby, founder of Crosby Marketing Communications.

- Robert P. DeStefano, owner of Sturbridge Homes.

- John and Penny Hopkins, owners of Admiral Cleaners.

- Gary Jobson, world class sailor, author and ESPN commentator.

- Michael S. Lofton, founding member of Anne Arundel Economic Development Corp.

- George H. Phelps Jr., first African-American sheriff's deputy who later founded training programs for minorities