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## Md. Speaker Could Control Fate of Slots

Busch Demonstrates His Power in Battle Against Governor's Top Initiative

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Two years ago, rookie Maryland House Speaker Michael E. Busch sidestepped his leadership team and relied on a loose coalition of religious, labor and African American leaders to mount an outsider's campaign against slot machine gambling.

This year, as Busch (D-Anne Arundel) launches a new effort to defeat Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr.'s number one initiative, the longtime Annapolis football coach has rewritten his playbook. Instead of nurturing a grass-roots assault by insurgents, Busch showed last week that he has assumed total control of his House leadership in trying to determine the fate of a gambling expansion in Maryland.

D. Bruce Poole, a former House majority leader, said Busch offered a glimpse of his power Friday, when he navigated his chamber to a 71 to 66 vote in favor of a watered-down slots bill that is unlikely to satisfy the governor or Senate leaders. He then emerged from the vote declaring that he would not compromise. The coalition of support for slots in the House is so fragile -- with precisely the number of votes needed for passage in the 141-member chamber -- that any attempt to change the bill would shatter it, he said.

"What he showed this week is that he has tremendous control of his chamber, and as a result, enormous influence over this process," Poole said.

Slots backers, including Ehrlich, said Busch inevitably will be forced to negotiate -- or face a withering assault from the majority of Marylanders who want slot machine gambling.

But the razor-thin victory for slots on the House floor appears to have given Busch precisely the outcome he was seeking. It helped soothe concerns from House members who wanted him to let them vote on slots; it wards off growing perceptions that by blocking a vote, he has been an obstructionist; and yet, it still could doom the governor's legislation.

Sen. Thomas M. Middleton (D-Charles) said Busch "has got himself into a pretty good position.

"If there's going to be a bill, it's going to be very close to his chamber's bill," said Middleton, a slots foe. "That's more than just luck."

Busch's maneuverings, however, are not without peril. Some lawmakers argued last week that if slots legislation isn't approved this year, Busch will be unable to shake the view that he has abused his position to thwart a popular proposal.

"He can't blame the Republicans or executive branch for not passing a bill if he doesn't let it go any further," said House Minority Leader George C. Edwards (R-Garrett). "Look, if he's going to kill the bill, he's going to kill the bill, but he can't blame anybody else."

And while Busch might have strengthened his hold over his chamber, his refusal to negotiate could further jeopardize strained relationships with the pro-slots Senate president and governor during the second half of the legislative session, when lawmakers must finish a \$25 billion budget and address hundreds of other bills.

In the three years since Busch became speaker, he has never been coy about his views on slots. Lawmakers have mused over the notion that the roots of his opposition lie with the gambling problems that consumed his father, who died in 1997 in a flophouse on the outskirts of Las Vegas.

But the burly, silver-haired speaker brushes off that suggestion, saying he merely wants to prevent the state from handing out valuable gaming licenses to a few well-heeled, politically connected insiders.

"I just don't think slots is good public policy," Busch said Friday, after the legislation passed the House.

The Maryland General Assembly has faced mounting pressure to address the question of whether to expand gambling since 2002, the year voters elected Ehrlich to succeed Parris N. Glendening (D), an ardent gambling foe.

Lawmakers have contemplated a range of proposals, several of which identified by name the sites where slots would go. The bills essentially pledged licenses to such wealthy horse track owners as Joseph De Francis and William Rickman and to developers and businessmen such as Baltimore bakery magnate John Paterakis Sr., National Harbor's Milton Peterson and the family of Baltimore Orioles owner Peter G. Angelos.

Busch said it was that, more than anything else, that helped shape the House's alternate proposal this year. While the Senate plan proposes 15,500 machines and seven locations, including four horse tracks, the House bill proposes 9,500 machines. And it broadly identifies the four locations where slots can go.

As the legislative session got underway, Busch faced increasing pressure to put the proposal to a vote. Last year, Republicans pounded him not only for blocking a slots vote but for offering an alternate plan that included a bulky array of new taxes. Vulnerable Democrats -- particularly those in Baltimore County's horse country, where slots are especially popular -- were telling him they needed to weigh in on the issue.

"Members privately, in caucus, had told him they wanted an up or down vote," said Speaker Pro Tem Adrienne A. Jones (D-Baltimore County). "It was important for them."

But whether the floor vote alone will resolve the matter for Busch remains to be seen. Both Ehrlich and Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr. (D-Calvert) have started to pressure Busch to the negotiating table.

"The speaker does not like slots. I get that, and I respect that," Ehrlich said during a radio interview yesterday morning on WBAL-AM. "On the other hand, there's a process here."

Busch, however, has remained firm, saying that Friday's vote marks his final contribution to an effort to compromise on slots. Regardless of whether the Senate and the governor choose to accept the House bill, Busch said he will "go home satisfied that it's the best possible approach."

When asked late Friday if he had just outfoxed his pro-slots adversaries -- the state's longest-serving Senate president and its first Republican governor in a generation -- Busch leaned back in his chair, collected himself and said nothing. Then a mile-wide smile spread across his face.

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