

Has Franchot got a horse for you

Likens bid for statewide visibility to 'Seabiscuit'

by Thomas Dennison

The Gazette Staff Writer 8-22-13

BRYANS ROAD — With the twangy strains of Willie Nelson's "On the Road Again" playing in the background, Del. Peter V.R. Franchot stood under a large oak tree eating a bowl of homemade peach ice cream while admiring the view of the Potomac River.

The scene here on Sunday evening was nothing out of the ordinary for Democrats in Western Charles County. The New Western Charles County Democratic Club has a summertime \$20-a-head fund-raiser each year that is known more for peach daiquiris, fried fish and watermelon wedges than political intrigue.

But this year there was something out of place, someone who did not really fit in but who was eager to make the rounds and explain why Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. (R) should be a one-term governor. That person was Franchot, a veteran delegate from far-off Montgomery County, who seemed delighted that he had driven down a dirt road to get to the fund-raiser and that he was politicking with hard-core Democrats who had never heard of him.

"I didn't quite understand why he was here," said Jewell Bragunier, a matriarch of Charles County politics and co-chairwoman of the Democratic Club.

She said "it was great" that Franchot (D-Dist. 20) of Takoma Park traveled all the way to Charles County, but she admitted that his appearance on Sunday and his scheduled return visit for the club's Oct. 23 meeting in Indian Head are a little puzzling.

Others tried to piece together the obvious.

Bob Johnson, a real estate magnate, said Franchot is clearly testing the waters for a statewide campaign. Why else "would a guy from Montgomery County come all the way down here?" he asked.

"I'm not sure what he is running for," Johnson said. "I guess that's why you're doing a story."

The story of Peter Van Rensselaer Franchot has yet to be told, but there is no doubt that the 55-year-old Connecticut native is ready to tell a tale that describes Ehrlich as a Republican monster.

Franchot charges Ehrlich with pandering to the rich, being "bitterly partisan" and friendly with environmental polluters, and "driving the state down a

road of destruction."

He has become an increasingly visible Democratic hit man who cold-calls reporters and is ready at a second's notice to fire partisan venom at the governor and his policies. Examples include pulling a page out of former President William J. Clinton's playbook and comparing Ehrlich with Herbert Hoover, who was blamed for the Great Depression and whom Clinton (D) compared to George H.W. Bush in 1992. Franchot also has tried to connect scandal-ridden corporations such as Enron and WorldCom to Ehrlich's budget policy.

Say the name Franchot to the governor, and he laughs out loud. Ehrlich has held up Franchot as the symbol of the liberal and "obstructionist" wing of the Democratic Party, and he echoed that sentiment Wednesday.

"Obviously, Peter Franchot is a major figure in the Maryland Democratic Party and he represents the dominant wing of the Democratic Party," Ehrlich said. "He should be out there. ... He is becoming the titular head of the Democratic Party."

Translation: Ehrlich relishes that a corporate lawyer from Takoma Park, the epicenter of Maryland liberals, is carrying the flag of the Democratic Party.

"We hope he keeps talking," said a top Ehrlich aide. "Bring him on."

Franchot does not stop with snappy quotes in newspapers and quips on Baltimore and Washington radio shows.

While some other lawmakers have been busy flip-flopping in favor of legalizing slot machines, Franchot has done a back-flip. Last year, he co-sponsored a slots bill by House Appropriations Committee Chairman Howard P. Rawlings (D-Dist. 40) of Baltimore, only to become a leading opponent this year.

Franchot said he co-sponsored the bill because Gov. Parris N. Glendening (D) opposed slots and the revenue generated would be "an add-on" to the state budget. He said his opposition to slots today is due to Ehrlich "holding the state budget hostage to get slots."

In short, Franchot is charting a message that strongly resonates with traditional Democrats — whether in a speech on the Eastern Shore or traveling to the end of Charles County for Sunday's fund-raiser.

He likened his strategy to the presidential campaign of former Vermont Gov. Howard B. Dean (D), whom Franchot supports and is galvanizing the Democratic base nationally with his fiery message and blistering attacks on President George W. Bush.

So what is Franchot running for?

"I would never say never," he responded when asked if he is laying the early foundation for a gubernatorial campaign. "There are a couple of other more established candidates," referring to Montgomery County Executive Douglas M. Duncan (D) and Baltimore Mayor Martin O'Malley (D).

But even as he referred to Duncan and O'Malley as Ehrlich's leading challengers in 2006, Franchot links the image of the two Democratic titans to War Admiral, the widely favored thoroughbred who was beaten by the smaller Seabiscuit.

In a sense, Franchot wants to be the left-leaning ideological Seabiscuit in a race against Duncan and O'Malley, whom he is bound to paint as centrist executives.

"There could always be a Seabiscuit," Franchot smiled. "He had a big heart."

The chattering classes have been wondering about Franchot's recent antics, which they figure point at him wanting to raise his statewide visibility.

Franchot interviewed for the job of Kathleen Kennedy Townsend's running mate last year, but he was rejected in favor of retired Navy Adm. Charles R. Larson, a former Republican. Still, some Democrats see benefits in Franchot's travels and believe that if he does not run for governor, he may be positioning for another running mate opportunity or a U.S. Senate bid in 2006.

"I think Peter is a very effective spokesman for the Democratic Party," said Cheryl C. Kagan, a Democratic consultant and former Montgomery County delegate. "It's good for his career, good for the party and good for Montgomery County for him to be traveling all around the state. He makes a good first impression, and he can make a compelling case as to why our state needs new leadership."

Franchot has met with two top strategists who worked on the presidential campaign of Vice President Al Gore (D), and Len Foxwell, a veteran of the Parris N. Glendening and Townsend campaigns, has advised him. Franchot is also expected to speak in Baltimore city and Western Maryland this fall.

"I think I'm filling a void of people who are willing to take a progressive Maryland agenda and say we are proud of the progress we've made," he said. "People are tired of the sense that they are not being told the truth. My main goal is to make sure why people should know how to make Bob Ehrlich a one-term governor."

Republicans, however, see endless

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ways to demonize him.

"The perception across the state of a candidate from Montgomery County is strongly negative," said Kevin Igoe, a Republican strategist based in Calvert County. "There is an impression that Montgomery County does a lot of kooky things."