

Taylor selected speaker of house

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ANNAPOLIS - Casper R. Taylor Jr. on Tuesday became the 102nd speaker of the Maryland House of Delegates after winning the unanimous support of all 116 House Democrats.

The Cumberland Democrat's election to the speaker's chair gives Western Maryland its greatest political clout in the State House in more than 40 years.

Never before has the presiding member of either chamber of the General Assembly hailed from as far west as Allegany County, and the region has not had such strong a presence in the capitol since William Preston Lane of Washington County served as governor from 1947-51.

Mr. Taylor's ascendance to speaker was greeted with enthusiasm by Frederick County's three Democratic members of the House. The three praised his intellect, experience and his leadership abilities and style.

Mr. Taylor, 58, assumed the post eight days after the former speaker, Chestertown Democrat R. Clayton Mitchell Jr., stunned the House by suddenly announcing his retirement.

Mr. Mitchell had served as speaker since 1987.

Tuesday's vote came as little surprise, as it became clear within a day of Mr. Mitchell's announcement that Mr. Taylor had quickly mustered the chamber's overwhelming support. He was elected by voice vote and faced no opposition.

Delegate James E. McClellan, chairman of the Frederick County delegation, was chosen to make the nomination of Mr. Taylor before the caucus.

"I rise to nominate the man who may well lead us into the 21st century," Dr. McClellan said. "His knowledge and vision over the past 19 years have certainly been well expressed to this body."

After the caucus, Dr. McClellan declared Mr. Taylor's election to be the biggest event for Western Maryland since he joined the legislature 15 years ago.

"This is so important to have some one at the head of the helm from your area," Dr. McClellan said.

In a brief speech to the caucus, Mr. Taylor declared that his election as speaker was "clearly the highest honor in my life," as well as an "awesome responsibility."

The state faces deficits through the end of the century, including a \$40 million shortfall in 1994 and \$70 million in 1995, he said. He promised to work through the state's economic problems as an ally of Gov. William Donald Schaefer, whom he called his friend.

In the coming session, he said, the House must weigh all legislative proposals against the state's immediate fiscal needs and restrictions.

As Democrats, Mr. Taylor said, the lawmakers face uncertainty among the electorate, and they must be prepared to demonstrate "decisiveness, not divisiveness."

Delegate Thomas Hattery, D-

Frederick, said Mr. Taylor's election "bodes well for the future. It's a positive change for the House. I think Cas is more insightful than Clay was, and more of a visionary, too. A lot of people who don't know Cas personally don't know that."

Mr. Taylor has helped change the image of rural legislators as being "country bumpkins," through his work crafting and passing the state's health reform bill last spring, Mr. Hattery said. "It was a progressive treatment of a seemingly intractable problem," he said.

Dr. McClellan also cited the health bill in his praise for Mr. Taylor, calling it the toughest piece of legislation he has ever seen pass.

Delegate George Littrell, D-Frederick, who served for 11 years under Mr. Taylor on the Economic

Matters Committee, said the new speaker has "a tremendous drive to work to be fair and keep issues in the proper balance. It's awful rewarding to see the right fellow in the right position."

It has been 115 years since a Western Maryland delegate has led the House. The last was Lewis C. Smith of Washington County, who held the speaker's chair from 1876-78. Mr. Taylor is the fourth Western Marylander to become speaker.

Lloyd Lowndes, who served as governor from 1896-1900, is the only Allegany County resident in the state's history to have achieved higher state office than Mr. Taylor. No president of the Senate has come from any further west than Frederick, and the only man to hold that post from the county was Thomas Sappington in 1834.