

Full House

Popular speaker faces no threats to power, but some wonder if reign stifling progress

by Josh Kurtz
and Thomas Dennison

Staff Writers

The Gazette 2-8-02

ANNAPOLIS — Speaker of the House Casper R. Taylor Jr. filed papers to run for re-election to the House of Delegates on Thursday.

Ordinarily, that would not be such a big deal for a legislative leader who has served in Annapolis since 1975. But Taylor's future has been the subject of high speculation during the past several weeks.

"I'm filing for re-election today, simply to try to clear up any second-guessing or confusion, particularly at home," Taylor told *The Gazette*.

Not that he would rule out higher office if the perfect opportunity presented itself.

On Tuesday, the day he would have been elected state treasurer had he sought the post, Taylor (D-Dist. 1C) of Cumberland — and the 140 other members of the House who follow his ambitions with intense personal interest — awoke to a front-page story in *The (Baltimore) Sun* about his desire to become lieutenant governor.

The job is not his for the asking. Lt. Gov. Kathleen Kennedy Townsend (D), the front-runner in the governor's race, does not have to select a running mate until just before the July 1 candidate filing deadline.

But while the *Sun* story was hardly news to political insiders, it provided the second vague hint in recent days — the treasurer's vacancy being the first — that Taylor might not be speaker much longer. And that is a tantalizing possibility to the many delegates who have grown frustrated with the glacial pace of change in House leadership during Taylor's nine years as speaker.

"I think there's a lot of pent-up demand [for change]," said Del. Ann Marie Doory (D-Dist. 43) of Baltimore, chairwoman of the Legislative Women's Caucus.

Almost without exception, delegates speak warmly of Taylor. Most agree that he has run as open and democratic a chamber as possible. They credit him for creating a bigger and more inclusive leadership team than any of his predecessors.

"Cas is thought of with extreme fondness," Doory said. "He's made an effort to diversify the leadership. He's known to listen and keep

an open mind."

But politics and politicians being what they are, many legislators are privately coming to believe that a prolonged Taylor reign as speaker — with its attendant fiefdoms for

committee chairmen and other seniors leaders — could impede their own political careers. Taylor's departure, on the other hand, would shake up the House in myriad ways.

"If he became lieutenant governor it would create a ripple effect," said Del. Talmadge Branch (D-Dist. 45) of Baltimore, president of the Legislative Black Caucus.

Some hopes sparked

When Richard N. Dixon announced last month that he was resigning as state treasurer, many of Taylor's colleagues assumed that he would try to succeed him — and win easily. For the past year, published reports have suggested that Taylor, 67, would be interested in the job.

"It is fair to say that [Taylor] has been looking to move up," said one member of House leadership. "Everyone thought he wanted to be the treasurer."

In anticipation of a possible quick Taylor exit early this session, supporters of House Economic Matters Committee Chairman Michael E. Busch (D-Dist. 30) of Annapolis, the presumed front-runner to succeed Taylor, began to line up votes on behalf of a Busch bid for speaker.

A majority of the House — a little too hopefully, perhaps — thought that Taylor would jump at the opportunity to seek the treasurer's post. Del. John F. Wood Jr. (D-Dist. 29A) of Mechanicsville, a

close Taylor ally and chairman of the House Commerce and Government Matters Committee, encouraged Taylor to take the job because he was under the impression he wanted to be treasurer.

Wood told *The Gazette* last month that he would hate to see Taylor leave the legislature, but added that the speaker would be "foolish" not to take the treasurer job because he would be elected overwhelmingly. Wood also said that Taylor should not hold out hope of being Townsend's running mate.

They were supposed to be comments of support, but Taylor apparently interpreted them to be a sign of dissension in the ranks, and Wood was in Taylor's doghouse for a while.

"[Taylor] didn't like my comments," Wood said this week. "But Cas and I have been friends for too long to let this really amount to anything."

In the hours after Dixon announced his resignation, several key members of House leadership met privately with Taylor to discuss possible successors. They were surprised when the speaker indicated that he did not want to be considered, but instead wanted to be lieutenant governor.

"I think [Dixon's] announcement caught him off guard and he didn't want to leave the House in the middle of the session," a House leader said.

Instead, Taylor promoted Del. Nancy K. Kopp (D-Dist. 16) of Bethesda to be treasurer. She was elected Tuesday and will be sworn in Feb. 14.

High anxiety

Some lawmakers were disappointed that Taylor did not take the opportunity — prompting whispers that he could be the object of a leadership fight next year if he is not tapped to be Townsend's running mate.

Some House veterans recall how Taylor's predecessor, R. Clayton Mitchell Jr., withstood a coup attempt after being speaker for six years, and then abruptly left the legislature a year later. The coup attempt may have served as a catalyst for Mitchell's departure because delegates who sided with his opponents saw what a new leadership team might have meant for their own career advancement.

"Everybody got a whiff of freedom," one former delegate recalled.

No one is suggesting that Taylor is in as tenuous a position as Mitchell was, or that his flirtations with higher office parallel Mitchell's situation. But some senior delegates said the next few months could be critical.

"The real question of a takeover will be asked in April or May if [Townsend] passes over him," one delegate said.

"Mike Busch will have to make some tough decisions if Cas comes back next year," said a member of House leadership who did not want to be named. "The question will have to be asked, 'How long do you want to wait?'"

Busch has privately told friends that with two young children, he may have to abandon his dream of becoming speaker and leave the legislature for a lucrative job.

But if there is going to be a coup next year, Busch apparently won't be leading it. Asked if there was any chance that he would try to challenge Taylor for the speakership after the 2002 election, Busch replied, "None at all."

"It's not that important that I'm willing to be disloyal," he said.

Busch said Taylor has no enemies.

"The members have deep respect for him and also affection for him, because he treats all of them fairly," he said.

But Busch conceded that the talk of Taylor running for lieutenant governor, on top of the treasurer's vacancy, has "precipitated some kind of anxiety"

among delegates.

"Everyone will find out by July 1 one way or another," he said of Taylor's future.

Taylor said he believes his job as speaker is secure.

"I don't sense any interest in forcing a change," he said. "I have a fantastic leadership team that is so well-balanced geographically and philosophically, and from the standard of gender and racial diversity. All of my leaders have pledged to me that they're comfortable being part of a team."

Taylor does not deny being interested in the No. 2 slot, but said, "You don't cross bridges until you get to them; otherwise you fall in the water."

Townsend's operatives have said she is not likely to select a running mate until shortly before the filing deadline because she first wants to see who her opponents are.

Succession chatter

Taylor — like many delegates — is aware that there are already sub rosa conversations about succession.

"Everybody knows who the heirs apparent are in any house," he said.

Busch, by most accounts, is the odds-on favorite.

"He's not from Montgomery County, he's not from the city [Baltimore], he's not too liberal, he's not too conservative," said a senior lobbyist. "I can't think of anybody who doesn't like Mike Busch."

Colleagues say Busch has been speaking out more frequently at meetings of the Democratic House Research Group, an organization for House Democrats.

"He's trying on the mantle and he's showing that he wears it well," said Del. Cheryl C. Kagan (D-Dist. 17) of Rockville.

"There is no question Mike Busch is ready to take the reins of the House," said House Majority Whip George W. Owings III (D-Dist. 27B) of Dunkirk.

But other candidates for speaker could emerge if Taylor were to depart.

"Certainly, nobody's going to jockey until [Taylor] does get picked [to run with Townsend]," Branch said. "Nobody wants to get caught out there."

Despite his failing health, House Appropriations Committee Chairman Howard P. Rawlings (D-Dist. 40) of Baltimore is known to covet the top job.

"I think if I decide to run, I would win," he said. "I'm more veteran [than Busch] and I have the largest standing committee."

Some colleagues have suggested that House Environmental Matters Committee Chairman John A. Hurson (D-Dist. 18) of Chevy Chase also could run for speaker some day.

"I want Cas to stay speaker for a long, long time," Hurson said.

Unless Townsend says otherwise, most delegates are convinced that Taylor will still be their leader after the elections this fall.

"There is no doubt in my mind that if Cas Taylor came back to this House as the delegate from Cumberland he would be speaker," Owings said.

Taylor, who flirted with the idea of running for governor in 1998, said reports that he is politically restless are greatly exaggerated.

"The job of presiding over this House is an awesome job," he said. "I think it clearly is the kind of job that culminates any career."

Staff Writer Steven T. Dennis contributed to this report.