

Democrats in Md. House Look West for a Speaker

Caucus Taps Allegany Delegate to Succeed Mitchell

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ANNAPOLIS, Nov. 23—Del. Casper R. Taylor Jr., a 58-year-old former bar owner, is poised to become the first House of Delegates speaker from Western Maryland in more than a century after winning the Democratic majority's nomination today.

Overcoming suspicion that his background as House Economic Matters Committee chairman made him too cozy with special interest lobbyists, Taylor got the party caucus nomination in a unanimous voice vote in the House chamber.

Democrats, who hold a 116 to 25 edge over Republicans in the House, should have no problem in January installing Taylor to succeed Speaker R. Clayton Mitchell Jr. (D-Kent). Mitchell stunned the House last week by announcing his abrupt retirement only eight weeks before the 1994 General Assembly session begins.

Taylor, from Allegany County, sought to reassure restive House members that his will be a more open and democratic administration. As a signal, he agreed to consider proposals that seek secret-ballot election of House leaders a year from now and to place Democrats on a more partisan footing against the resurgent Republican Party.

"We are facing uncertainty with the electorate," Taylor said in an address to the House Democratic Caucus. "We must show that Democrats . . . can make tough decisions for the common good" to strengthen criminal laws, improve schools, contain health care costs and safeguard the environment and the economy.

Taylor, who describes his occupation as full-time legislator, went out of his way to mention that Democratic Gov. William Donald Schaefer is "my friend." But confronting criticism that he could be bullied by Schaefer or veteran Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr. (D-Prince George's) in the

last session before 1994 elections, Taylor added, "Be assured I will protect the integrity and the will of this House."

Taylor, a member of the House since 1975 and the most senior member of Mitchell's leadership team, took an unusual path to the speakership, one of the three most powerful jobs in Maryland state government.

He is the first in nearly two decades to ascend to the top House post who did not come up through the Appropriations or Ways and Means committees. The Economic Matters Committee, which Taylor has chaired since 1987, has jurisdiction over business and occupational regulation, banking, insurance, vehicle laws and alcoholic beverages.

Because of its responsibilities, the committee often is viewed as closely linked to business interests, which provide large campaign contributions to the panel's members.

But Taylor said it is "obviously incorrect" that his chairmanship has been marked by his accommodation of the business lobby.

"The Economic Matters Committee deals with 90 percent of the hot issues that affect the business world, so it's obvious that the chairman of the committee would be rubbing elbows with those lobbyists," Taylor said in an interview after he got the nomination. "I'm proud of the way I handled all those lobbyists as chairman."

Taylor got much of the credit early this year for bringing together divergent interests so the General Assembly could enact legislation designed to make health insurance more affordable for individuals and businesses in Maryland.

Del. Gene W. Counihan (D), chairman of the Montgomery County House delegation, said he expects Taylor to be a "fair and impartial" leader, adding that he does not believe Taylor will be as "heavy-handed" as his predecessor.