

Ex-Democratic Leader Pulling for Slots

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By LORI MONTGOMERY
Washington Post Staff Writer

Maryland Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. has enlisted Democrat Casper R. Taylor Jr. to help reshape his plan to legalize slot machines and break down stiff resistance to the proposal in the House of Delegates, where Taylor ruled as speaker for nine years until his defeat last fall.

In an interview yesterday, Taylor said he met with Ehrlich (R) last weekend and offered to broker a compromise with House leaders on the slots legislation. Ehrlich "was very interested," Taylor said, and the former speaker from Western Maryland began conferring with Ehrlich's legislative aides first thing Monday morning.

Paul E. Schurick, Ehrlich's communications director, confirmed that Taylor is "part of our team," though he said Taylor will not be paid for his work and that the scope of the former speaker's role has yet to be decided.

"He offered to help with slots in the House of Delegates. The governor said fine," Schurick said. "The governor told him anything he can do would be welcome."

Taylor's entry into the gambling fray puts him at sharp odds with his protégé, Michael E. Busch (D-Anne Arundel), the new House speaker. Busch is leading the charge to block Ehrlich's gambling proposal, which is crucial to the new governor's plan to wipe out a \$1.8 billion shortfall and balance the state budget without significant new taxes.

Yesterday, Busch welcomed Taylor's involvement. He called the former speaker a "great statesman" who could help patch up the increasingly rancorous relationship between Busch and Ehrlich, who were close friends when both served as state legislators nearly a decade ago.

"If I thought Casper was on board, the first thing I would do would be to meet with the former speaker, my mentor, and try to speak to the governor personally," Busch said, adding that he would be willing to support a slots bill

that places any gambling plan before state voters, as Taylor has long insisted should be done.

Taylor's involvement also puts Ehrlich at odds with House Republicans, who were furious two weeks ago when Ehrlich offered to appoint the Democrat to an unpaid position on a state health commission.

Schurick said Taylor's long years of experience and "personal relationships" in Annapolis are worth a little interpartisan grumbling, particularly if Taylor can help sell Ehrlich's plan to the Democrats who control both houses of the General Assembly.

"We need 71 votes in the House. There are 98 Democrats and 43 Republicans," Schurick said.

Taylor said he is willing to assist Maryland's first Republican governor in more than three decades because he believes expanded gambling is good for the state and good for Western Maryland, home to one of four racetracks where Ehrlich has proposed installing slot machines. The state, Taylor said, would gain millions in revenue to fund a historic increase in aid to public schools. And impoverished

Western Maryland would get more than 500 new jobs.

"I don't look at it as though I'm helping a Republican administration. I look at it as helping my state," Taylor said. "I think I've got blinders on when it comes to who's an R and who's a D in this game."

Taylor, 68, was narrowly defeated in November by Republican Leroy E. Myers Jr., whose campaign gained an immeasurable boost from Ehrlich's success among voters in Taylor's conservative district.

Since his loss, Taylor has been angling for a way to return to Annapolis. Last week, Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr. (D-Prince George's), an ardent slots supporter, encouraged Ehrlich to seek Taylor's help.

"It helps to have institutional memory. I pointed out [Ehrlich] lacks it in his staff," Miller said.

Miller said Ehrlich told him he would talk with Taylor during a weekend trip to Cumberland. At Taylor's suggestion, he and the governor had coffee at the Rocky Gap resort early Saturday.

Despite the chaos surrounding Ehrlich's slot machines bill, Taylor said he believes it can still win House approval.