

Md. Speaker Facing an Inglorious End

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For nearly a generation, Casper R. Taylor Jr. has played two key and intertwined roles in the life of Maryland government.

The first was as a hard-working and influential legislator who rose to become the longest-serving speaker of the House of Delegates, with the power to steer the state's agenda and mold its hierarchy. The second was as political godfather to the state's mountainous and struggling western panhandle, the man who brought home the bacon in the form of roads, jobs and more than \$600 million in funding.

Now, friends and foes from Annapolis to Frostburg are grappling with the news that the Cas Taylor era may be coming to an abrupt and inglorious end.

In a bitterly close race, Taylor appeared Tuesday to have lost his district seat of 28 years to a political newcomer. By Thursday, he trailed opponent LeRoy Myers (R) by 71 votes after absentee ballots were counted. He announced yesterday that he will seek a recount.

The 67-year-old Democrat did not return several calls for comment but told the Associated Press that "the statewide importance of the position and the closeness of the count warrant a recount to bring closure to the issue."

Yet even with that closure pending, others are working on the assumption that Taylor will not return to the State House for a 29th legislative season in January. In Annapolis, old friends already are jockeying for the speakership behind the apparent front-runner, Del. Michael E. Busch (D-Anne Arundel).

And in Taylor's home base of Allegany County, a kind of grieving is underway. Cumberland Mayor Lee N. Fiedler, a Republican who nonetheless became one of Taylor's biggest local supporters, said the speaker's loss is a loss for all of Western Maryland.

"We're going to look back a few years from now and find this was a very costly decision for our community," he said.

Indeed, Taylor served as a virtual one-man economic engine for the region, using his positions of influence to direct hundreds of millions of dollars in capital projects to the panhandle—two prisons, a Cumberland YMCA, a headquarters for the Kelly-Springfield tire company,

the construction of Interstate 68 and state-subsidized flights to link the remote area with major transportation hubs.

Taylor also orchestrated an elaborate and controversial plan to build up tourism as a source of jobs to replace those lost in the region's dying coal mining and manufacturing industries. Starting in 1986, he persuaded state leaders to send \$50 million worth of subsidies for new tourist attractions, including the conference center and golf course at Rocky Gap State Park, the Wisp ski resort, the Canal Place historic area and a scenic railway between Cumberland and Frostburg.

Portly, plainspoken and shy, the former tavern owner cut an unlikely figure as one of the three most powerful elected leaders in Maryland, along with the governor and Senate president. He gained and kept respect with a quick mind, an enthusiastic grasp of policy minutiae and an old-fashioned political skill at brokering consensus behind the scenes.

Fiedler saw the latter skill at work many times in Allegany. "He has a tremendous ability to get different sides in a room and come up with where you want to go," the mayor said. "This is a tremendous leadership trait."

In accumulating influence, Taylor—like many Maryland politicians—sometimes was trailed by a whiff of scandal. He was investigated but ultimately cleared by an 1998 ethics panel of promoting a lucrative state coal mining deal that benefited a friend, for whom he also helped broker a state bailout of a failing Frostburg restaurant.

Still, he was thought to have a safe berth in District 1C, representing his home town of Cumberland along with the eastern two-thirds of Allegany County. Then in June, the Court of Appeals redrew the governor's legislative redistricting map, and suddenly, 1C's boundaries stretched east into Washington County, where Myers, a general contractor from Clear Springs, was preparing for his first race.

Most observers attribute Taylor's loss to the new configuration, which threw a couple thousand new voters into his district, and the heavy Republican turnout in rural Maryland for gubernatorial victor Robert L. Ehrlich Jr.

Yet Taylor's status in Annapolis may have hurt him as much as it helped. As speaker since 1994, a standard-bearer for the party, he espoused views that often rankled his conservative district—tax increases, gay rights and most particularly gun control.

"I think there's a perception that perhaps Cas was part of the Glendening-Townsend group," with its legacy of a \$1.7 billion state deficit over two years, said John N. Bambacus, a former senator from Frostburg.

Myers argues that residents were underwhelmed by Taylor's tourism efforts, which created mostly low-paying service jobs: "There are people from Allegany who come down to work for me because they can't live off \$7.36 an hour."