

Glendening defends Taylor against critics

Dispute: There have been rumors that the House speaker "sold" his vote on the governor's gun-safety bill to get \$1 million for Allegany County schools.

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HOUSE SPEAKER Casper R. Taylor Jr., who needs all the friends he can get these days, has found one in Gov. Parris N. Glendening.

Taylor has come under fire in his hometown, Cumberland, for his role in a controversy about school closings. He was the subject of an effusive testimonial by the governor last week in a letter to the Cumberland *Times-News*.

Praising his fellow Democrat's "character and integrity," Glendening defended Taylor against rumors that he had "sold" his vote on the governor's gun-safety bill for \$1 million to stave off school closings in Allegany County.

"I have been troubled to see the distortions and misrepresentations that are circulating about Speaker Cas Taylor's efforts to secure desperately needed funding for the Allegany school system," Glendening wrote.

The \$1 million that is the subject of the rumors was a late addition to Glendening's budget made at the behest of Taylor and other Western Maryland lawmakers. Their efforts backfired when the Allegany school board decided to spurn the money because of strings that could have delayed their school-closing plans.

Glendening recounted Taylor's successful effort to bring \$3.3

million in state money — apart from the rejected \$1 million — back to the perennially under-funded Allegany school system.

"Without Speaker Taylor's diligence, the school board would be facing an unprecedented shortfall — and would have been forced to make far more devastating cuts," Glendening wrote.

The governor added that Taylor "never mixed his advocacy for the Allegany County schools with any other issue before the legislature."

Taylor, who at one time considered a primary challenge to Glendening's 1998 re-election, has become an increasingly staunch ally of the governor. He played a vital role in securing passage of Glendening's gun-safety bill this year.

Whether the governor's letter helps the speaker in Cumberland remains to be seen. Glendening narrowly carried Allegany County in 1998, but his gun law is a tough sell in Western Maryland.

Taylor said the governor volunteered to write the letter. "It was a very accurate defense of and affirmation of my leadership," Taylor said.

Likely successor to Taylor might leave legislature

He is considered a front-runner to become the next speaker, but Del. Michael E. Busch might leave the legislature soon.

The Annapolis Democrat confirms that he is a finalist in the search for a new executive director at the Injured Workers Insurance Fund.

After heading the House committee that handles insurance matters for the last six years, Busch no doubt has a solid grasp of the industry.

"I have a great background from the legislature in insurance," Busch said. "I'd certainly like to take the opportunity to see if it's a good match for me and the company."

But would he walk away from a chance to succeed Taylor and become one of the most powerful officials in the state?

Sources say Busch is wondering how much longer he might have to wait for the speaker's job to open up. Unless an opportunity to run for statewide office comes along, Taylor has said, he plans to run for re-election.

The IWIF job probably would mean a big jump in salary for Busch, who is a supervisor with the Anne Arundel County parks department. When Paul M. Rose announced his resignation as IWIF director in February, he was earning \$147,000.

If Busch leaves and the speakership opens up, Majority Leader John A. Hurson of Montgomery County and Appropriations Committee Chairman Howard P. Rawlings of Baltimore will be leading contenders.

Both men would have to overcome their strong regional identifications. Busch had been considered a strong contender because Annapolis is not too strongly in the orbit of the Washington or Baltimore areas.