

Taylor seeks changes in mass transit funding

■ Guarantee substance-abuse treatment for parents at risk of losing custody of their children.

Speaker also urges
expanded child health
care, increased school aid

By MICHAEL DRESSER
SUN STAFF 11.19.99

House Speaker Casper R. Taylor Jr., declaring that a time of prosperity is ripe for "daring change," proposed a state agenda yesterday that would revamp mass transit funding, extend health insurance to thousands of children and adults, and increase state education aid to Baltimore and six "distressed" counties.

The proposals are part of an ambitious legislative package that the House Democratic leadership will promote during the 2000 legislative session, which begins Jan. 12.

Taylor's agenda draws heavily on the state's almost \$1 billion surplus, while limiting tax cuts to the repeal of the state's inheritance tax and a research and development tax credit for businesses. The agenda makes no mention of broader cuts in the state income, sales or property taxes.

"It's better to spend the money on investing in the kind of infrastructure that will return dividends to us in the future," Taylor said.

House Minority Leader Robert H. Kittleman expressed disappointment that the agenda did not include an acceleration of the state income tax cut passed in 1997. But he said he was not surprised because Gov. Parris N. Glendening had opposed the idea.

"The Democratic leadership really hesitates to buck the governor," the Howard County Republican said.

The agenda avoids calling for increased taxes — including a higher gas tax to shore up the state's Transportation Trust Fund.

Instead, the speaker is proposing to dedicate a gradually increasing percentage of the state's sales tax revenue to mass transit, eliminating the need to pay for bus and rail lines from the trust fund.

Mass transit and highway spending compete for money from the fund, which is fueled by the gas tax and vehicle user fees. Under Taylor's program, the fund would be used for roads alone. Taylor said the growth in Maryland's economy over 10 years should be able to make up the loss to the general fund, which pays most of the state's bills.

The agenda also includes a \$3 million-a-year plan to subsidize commuter air service between Baltimore-Washington International Airport and regional airports in Cumberland, Salisbury, Hagerstown and St. Mary's County.

"You need to start looking at a commuter airplane as a flying bus," Taylor said, noting that mass transit fares are subsidized at 50 percent of the cost of the service. "If a commuter airplane is a flying bus, then it ought to get a fare-box subsidy, just like any other form of mass transit."

Taylor said the lack of air service between BWI and the regional airports puts Western Maryland, the Eastern Shore and Southern Maryland at a disadvantage in economic development.

Another proposal would create a specialized court to handle complex technology-related cases.

Other proposals in the package would:

- Provide health insurance subsidies for an unspecified number of low-income workers, especially those who have recently been pushed off welfare rolls.

- Expand the Children's Health Insurance Program to 12,000 more children by raising the upper income limit to about \$39,000 for a family of four. The bill would also seek to expand health care coverage for parents of children enrolled in the program.

- Build on Taylor's "One Maryland" initiative to help seven economically lagging jurisdictions, including Baltimore, by providing additional education aid based on the number of teachers. The formula would encourage but not require the school systems to raise teacher pay to competitive levels.