

Raise favored for state workers

Next speaker also wants to end wealth tax

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Casper R. Taylor Jr. wants high-income Marylanders and lower-paid state workers to have something to cheer about during the 1994 General Assembly session.

The all-but-elected Speaker of the House of Delegates favors giving state workers their first cost-of-living raise since July 1990. He also says he's leaning toward allowing a temporary tax on the wealthy to expire a year from now.

The conservative Mr. Taylor has said little about his plans as speaker, but he sketched out his positions on some crucial issues in an interview last week.

By nature a cautious and deliberate man, the 59-year-old former tavern owner from Cumberland said he is not completely comfortable with the power bestowed on him by fellow Democrats last month when they unanimously nominated him for speaker after incumbent R. Clayton Mitchell Jr. announced his resignation.

Since Democrats are the majority in the House, Mr. Taylor is virtually guaranteed to win the election next month, when the 90-day legislative session begins.

The speaker is one of the three most powerful jobs in state government, and Mr. Taylor will have a sizable amount of influence over the 140 other delegates.

The other two power-brokers are Gov. William Donald Schaefer and Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr., whose views are better known since they have been in their jobs for years.

Mr. Taylor said a top priority will be finding money in the post-recession budget for cost-of-living raises for 75,000 state employees.

The governor and Mr. Miller also say they would like to give workers a raise, and the amount being kicked around is 3 percent.

"There's no question that state employees of Maryland are heroes. They've gone four years without any raises," Mr. Taylor said.

He also is concerned about the top 1.2 percent of taxpayers, the more than 25,000 Marylanders who qualify for the state's highest income tax bracket. The General Assembly adopted a 6 percent

bracket for them in 1992 in the throes of the budget crisis but promised that the higher tax would end automatically after three years.

The tax applies to individuals with taxable incomes of \$100,000 or more and to families with incomes of \$150,000 or more.

Some legislative leaders are talking about extending the tax beyond next year, while others want to let it expire as planned.

"I lean toward the position that we passed that bill during a recession for the purpose of getting us through a recession," Mr. Taylor said.

"From all indications, revenues are increasing — perhaps too slowly — but we are coming out of the recession. Therefore I think it's going to be very difficult to break a promise when the emergency situation that created the issue to begin with is no longer there."

If he continues to lean in that direction, the higher bracket is all but certain to expire as scheduled.

Senate President Miller, a Prince George's County Democrat, said many Senate leaders also oppose extending the tax.

"Many of us feel such a tax, if continued, is anti-business and sends the wrong message in terms of economic development and trying to entice corporations to locate in Maryland," Mr. Miller said.

The governor is still considering whether he will seek legislation extending the 6 percent tax bracket, his press secretary said last week.

With Mr. Taylor in the speaker's office, special interest groups will have a tough time trying to win substantive changes to Maryland's landmark health care reform law.

Mr. Taylor was an architect of House Bill 1359, which was designed to make medical insurance more available and affordable to employees of small companies, many of whom do not have insurance now. It also created a powerful commission to oversee the cost of and access to medical care.

Mr. Taylor said, "This is not the time to rewrite 1359. This is the time to allow the new commission to go about its business. . . Its missions are all going to take time, so I would ask the vested interests in the health care system to display a little bit of patience."

As part of its work, the commission has given tentative approval to a health benefits plan that insurers will be required to offer

small businesses in Maryland starting in July. The plan includes coverage for abortion, and anti-abortion forces are likely to seek legislation to delete the coverage or make it optional.

Mr. Taylor said he is "personally very much opposed to abortion," but said he's "not taking any preconceived position." He declined to be pinned down on how he would view attempts to delete abortion coverage.

Mr. Taylor, a chain smoker, also was vague about his position on anti-smoking bills, which are introduced almost every session.

"I have very mixed emotions and thinking about the issue. There's no denying the fact I have a smoking addiction. Quite frankly I'm trying very hard to do something about that personally," he said.

Nonetheless, he may take a critical look at bills that would hurt businesses that sell cigarettes.

"Fundamentally we avoid the bottom line in this whole argument, and I guess that bottom line becomes, 'Should the product be legal or illegal?' Up to this point the product is legal. Not only is it legal, it serves as a major revenue source for the state and federal government," Mr. Taylor said.