

New Power in the State House

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Casper R. Taylor won a one-year tryout from Democrats in the House of Delegates yesterday. If the 58-year-old Cumberland delegate handles the job of House speaker with skill and finesse, he could wind up with a five-year run. But if dissatisfaction arises, or if Mr. Taylor's coziness with special-interest lobbyists becomes an issue, his show could close after next year's election.

It will be a delicate high-wire act. Ambitious delegates from the Baltimore and Washington regions are already maneuvering for a battle with Mr. Taylor following the 1994 elections, in which incumbents must run in redrawn districts. Yet Mr. Taylor is under the gun to keep the House from splintering into feuding clans when the General Assembly session starts Jan. 12. His best hope for keeping his new job is to bring harmony and a sense of unity to the 141-member chamber.

He has done it before as chairman of the House Economic Matters Committee, a panel that is often at the center of special-interest legislation. While Mr. Taylor's proximity to lobbyists representing insurance companies and banks has been questioned on occasion, he has steered numerous bills of significance to passage, especially the landmark health-insurance reform package earlier this year. He has also been a diehard proponent of no-fault auto insurance, interstate banking and stronger

oversight of Blue Cross and Blue Shield.

On top of that, he is recognized as "Mr. Western Maryland," a dogged optimist who pushed hard to complete the National Freeway, the Rocky Gap golf course and conference center, to build the new state and federal prisons near Cumberland, to first save and then to redevelop the Kelly-Springfield plant and to bring major improvements to Frostburg State College. He clearly understands the importance of economic development and the crucial ties between the public and private sectors.

Moreover, Mr. Taylor has shown a real interest in helping Baltimore City. He favors a more equitable school-aid formula. He has been a city booster in the legislature for years. And he has worked well with city mayors and with state governors on issues far removed from his Cumberland district.

Yes, Cas Taylor must prove himself in the upcoming General Assembly session. He will have to deal with a mercurial and highly political Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller. He will have to deal with an unpredictable but well-meaning Gov. William Donald Schaefer. And he must chart a course for the House that leads to a legislative session of solid successes without being dictatorial or amenable to special interests. Mr. Taylor has always wanted this opportunity. Now is his chance to prove he is up to this difficult challenge.