

Cas Taylor plays a unique role in Annapolis

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By BARRY RASCOVAR

CASPER R. Taylor fills a void in political Annapolis: He's a legislator with vision. Call him the "idea man" of the Maryland State House.

While Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller is content to remain a reactive political counter-puncher, House Speaker Taylor doesn't hesitate to aggressively attack tough issues.

Indeed, he often is more imaginative in coming up with permanent social solutions than Gov. Parris N. Glendening.

Usually, political leaders in the State House try to patch things up that are broken.

They react only after the crisis is upon them. The result often is a quick fix.

In contrast, Mr. Taylor considers the long-range implications.

And he takes a far broader, more catholic view on issues than most of his colleagues.

He led the charge on health-care reforms, a devilishly complex matter with no easy answers.

He has been a consistent champion of aid for Baltimore City and other depressed subdivisions — including his own Allegany County — that have not shared in the current economic boom.

Now he is proposing a major shift of tax revenue to pay for mass transit systems in Maryland, a notion that is both far-reaching and yet eminently achievable.

He is, once again, two steps ahead of the governor on an issue.

Mr. Taylor's bent for taking the initiative has turned the House of Delegates into the chamber that creates its own agenda each session, at times more ambitious in scope than the governor's.

This situation has left the Senate — a cantankerous group that treasures independence over unity — embarrassed and defensive: Too often, House-passed initiatives are given the cold shoulder by senators because it wasn't their idea.

Mr. Taylor regularly emphasizes the need for looking beyond parochial interests. He has worked

assiduously — with some success — to lessen the animus between Baltimore City and Montgomery County delegates. He has encouraged delegates to tour other parts of Maryland to get a feel for the diversity and perspectives of a state with starkly different regions.

He proudly embraces a "One Maryland" concept — his version of the "All for one, one for all" motto of Dumas' "The Three Musketeers."

He believes that rural lawmakers like himself should come to the aid of a distressed Baltimore City because it is in the best interest of the entire state to do so.

He also believes that such good deeds will lead to a more harmonious state, where there is less urban-suburban-rural conflict. His view is that social ills should be remedied regardless of what part of the state the problem lies.

Though he is a traditional rural conservative, Mr. Taylor has not imposed his beliefs on the House. That was a wise political move, since he is far more to the right of center than his liberal and moderate colleagues from the state's bigger jurisdictions.

Mr. Taylor's conservative leanings — especially on gun control and on abortion — make it difficult for him to achieve his ultimate dream: becoming governor. That's unfortunate. He has the sort of thoughtful, creative mind that our elected executives should possess.

At the moment, though, he seems content to solve problems as House speaker.

He's a quiet negotiator and a determined consensus-seeker, not given to raising his voice often in anger. That has served him well.

He also is not above mixing political pork with his grander schemes: The Cumberland native makes sure plenty of aid is steered toward his city and Allegany County in most of his proposals.

The joke in Annapolis is that Mr. Taylor's "One Maryland" plan actually is a cover for the speaker's true intent: a "One Allegany" aid program.

Every state needs someone who dreams big, who looks beyond today's crisis, who worries about tomorrow's problems — and who acts to do something about them.

Maryland could use more "idea men" like Casper Taylor in its legislature, and in the governor's offices, too.

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