

House Speaker Taylor is hit with unprecedented criticism

After 27 years, legislator's honeymoon with Allegany is over

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CUMBERLAND — In a normal year, this would be a time for House Speaker Casper R. Taylor, Jr. to relax and enjoy springtime in his beloved Western Maryland after a productive General Assembly session.

But this is a miserable May for the powerful speaker, who has become the target of unusually harsh hometown criticism over his handling of local and state-wide issues.

"You are looking at a very wounded man, spiritually wounded. I'm not kidding you," Taylor lamented last week in his

downtown district office. "In 27 years, I've never gone through what I've been going through right now. I'm being crucified with lies and distortions."

The 65-year-old Democrat, whose mastery of the House of Delegates is unquestioned, is taking a pounding in once-friendly newspaper columns and radio talk shows in his native Cumberland.

On one flank are sportsmen who feel betrayed over his support for Gov. Parris N. Glendening's gun safety bill. On the other are parents outraged by Taylor's opposition to the school board's decision to move forward with a money-saving school consolidation plan.

From the hills are coming potshots over his support for a race-track in rural Little Orleans.

Taylor remains popular among Allegany County's leaders, but there [See Taylor, 6A]

After 27 years, honeymoon's over for Taylor

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are signs of problems at the grass roots, where some see him as a remote and autocratic figure.

Moms at Little League fields are criticizing his immensely successful efforts to bring jobs to Western Maryland as so much prison-building.

Student council members at a Cumberland high school have circulated a bulletin questioning his ethics and describing him as "our so-called Allegany County 'god.'"

The mounting damage has prompted some local activists to speculate that the once-unassailable Taylor — who has never had a primary opponent or been in a close general election race in a quarter-century in the General Assembly — could be vulnerable if he seeks re-election.

"There are people, Republicans and Democrats, who are searching for someone to run against him who would be a viable candidate," said Kimi-Scott McGreevy, a Cumberland mother and Democrat supporting the school board's fight with Taylor over school closings.

Any insurgent candidacy would be the longest of long shots. Even local Republican leaders say they want Taylor to stay where he is.

"Cas does so much for Western Maryland. If we would ever lose him as speaker of the House, Allegany County and all of Western Maryland would suffer," said Dale R. Lewis, a Republican county commissioner and member of the GOP central committee.

In Annapolis, Taylor is regarded as Western Maryland's greatest political asset. As House speaker since 1994, he has used the influence of his office to win hundreds of millions of state and federal dollars for projects in the economically distressed region.

The value of his influence is nowhere more apparent than in downtown Cumberland, a city that is showing signs of a rebound after decades of decline caused by the loss of major industrial employers.

Standing on the platform of the historic Western Maryland Railway terminal, under restoration with money the speaker brought home, Taylor pointed to where his legacy is taking shape.

There's the parkway that will run to the airport, thanks to \$50 million in state funds. There's Canal Place, a \$250 million state and



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Doubters: Erin DeLong (left), with sons Tyler, 12, and Casey (in Orioles shirt), 8; and Kimi-Scott McGreevy with children Kerrigan Clark (in her lap), 4, Caitlin Clark, 5, and Regan Clark, 2, outside the Parkside School.

federal project that will bring the now-dry C&O Canal back into the heart of Cumberland, where tourists will be able to ride like 19th-century travelers on canal boats pulled by mules.

"I'd like to leave this place better than I found it," Taylor said.

His efforts have won him the gratitude of many local citizens.

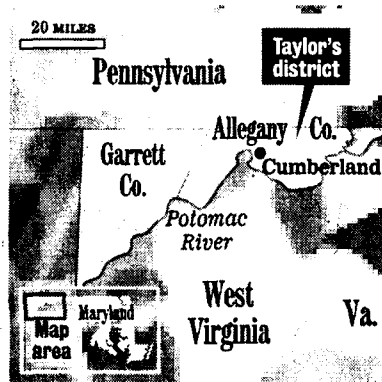
Gino Giatras, owner of the 82-year-old Coney Island and Curtis hot dog shop, refused a visitor's offer to pay for a lunch with the speaker.

"Without Cas up here in Western Maryland, there'd be no money," Giatras said. "At least we got a foothold with Cas."

But with local unemployment down by almost half from its 1992 peak of 13.3 percent, some constituents feel free to question the type of jobs Taylor has brought to Allegany County.

"All he's done is bring prisons and ... a playground for the rich at Rocky Gap," said Nina Rizer of Cumberland. She was one of several county residents to express resentment over the state-funded Rocky Gap resort, for which Taylor was the leading advocate.

With no recent polls available,



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it is difficult to tell whether Taylor is in serious political trouble. But even if the recent attacks are merely the work of a vocal minority, they are finding their target in the proud and sometimes touchy former tavern owner.

"I'm hurt. I don't think I've ever been as hurt in my life as I have been in the last month," Taylor said.

Some of the criticism is being fanned by the National Rifle Association and gun-rights groups over his role in passing Glendening's landmark gun-safety legislation.

Gun control is far less popular

in Western Maryland than in other parts of the state, and Taylor was the only delegate west of Hagerstown to vote for the bill, the first in the nation to require built-in locks on handguns.

More deeply damaging is a local battle over the future of the Allegany County school system, in which Taylor has alienated a significant number of his constituents.

The problem stems from the county's population drop, which has sent the number of public school students falling from about 18,000 to 10,000 over the past decade.

In spite of that decline, the school board was for years unable to muster the political will to close under-populated schools. That temporizing has left the system in a serious financial pinch.

This year, with the sense of crisis growing, a board majority led by machine shop operator Tim Woodring finally decided to move ahead with consolidation, a stand that has won considerable support in Cumberland.

As a result of various actions, Taylor has become identified as the leading foe of consolidation, which he says is not the case.

He says that closings are necessary but that he would prefer to wait for the results of an independent performance audit, which would delay any action for a year.

Taylor says it's "crazy" to implement a consolidation plan before a study can be done by a professional consultant, but the board decided a delay would force unacceptable curriculum cuts.

Erin DeLong, a parent who supports the board, suspects the audit is a ploy to derail consolidation.

"We don't have any faith that it's going to be truly independent," said DeLong, a Republican who voted for Taylor in 1998 but is disenchanted.

The board also decided to reject \$1 million in state aid Glendening put in his budget at Taylor's request to help the school system balance its books for next year.

Members balked at budget language that would have required them to hold off on closings until the audit was complete.

Accurate or not, the notion has gained hold in Allegany County that a meddlesome and dictatorial



Challenged: House Speaker Casper R. Taylor Jr., in front of renovated Western Maryland Railway station in Cumberland, says he's hurt by recent attacks.

speaker is interfering with an independent local board to spare rural constituents from school closings that are necessary.

"There is definitely a perception that the speaker is involved at a level higher than he should be," said Woodring.

The school issue and the gun brouhaha became intertwined when the Cumberland newspaper ran a page one story — about a week after the fact — that Taylor was supporting a compromise gun-safety bill. The article was juxtaposed with news that the governor had offered the additional \$1 million to county schools.

Critics charged that Taylor had "sold" his vote on the gun bill. The allegation was recycled in a bulletin issued by the student council at Allegany High School, where rumors swirled that Taylor was behind a proposal to close the school.

The bulletin went on to insinuate, without offering evidence, that Taylor's actions were motivated by financial gain. "Backroom politics are at work and personal gain and power is at hand for our speaker of the House," it said.

When shown the bulletin, Taylor tossed it on the table and called

it "totally trash."

"I've never suggested to any human being that Allegany High School be closed or restructured. It's absurd," he said.

He expressed outrage over the allegations of vote-trading and rumors of financial motives.

"They're inferring that I'm a liar, that I'm crooked. I resent it to the depths of my soul," he said.

The problem for Taylor is that the charges are being taken seriously by constituents such as Frances Hixon, 34. Hixon, who was interviewed at a local Little League field, said she had heard a lot of speculation that Taylor's role in the school controversy is motivated by personal gain.

Her husband is an NRA member who was bothered by the gun-safety vote. "People think with these two issues now in Allegany County, he may be able to be defeated," she said.

Taylor said he does not intend to back down from any fights, and he appears ready to seek re-election and another term as speaker in 2002. If he does, "I'm going to approach it with all my heart and the fighting spirit I learned as a kid," he said.