

He's the friendly host of the House

CASPER R. TAYLOR JR.

Speaker of the Maryland House of Delegates

Born: Cumberland, Md., Dec. 19, 1934

Residence: Cumberland

Party affiliation: Democrat

Education: B.A. University of Notre Dame, South Bend, Ind.

Career: Maryland House speaker since 1994; Economic Matters Committee chairman, 1986-94; committee vice chairman 1978-86; Western Maryland delegation chairman, 1982-86; former restaurant owner

Family: Married, two sons, five grandchildren

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By Margie Hyslop
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The Senate's approval last week of \$15 million to put water back into 1.1 miles of the long, dry Chesapeake & Ohio Canal in Cumberland, Md., fell like music on the ears of Casper R. Taylor, speaker of the Maryland House of Delegates.

After all, he has long supported the Canal Place project, which aims to draw businesses and tourists to downtown Cumberland and the Western Maryland counties he represents.

The rewatering project and the creation of a high-speed, fiber-optic highway are two key pieces of his plan to bring prosperity to Maryland's mountains in the next century. "If we can get the outside world up here and have that kind of infrastructure, we can sell them on our quality of life," Mr. Taylor says.

Though he's always at the front when Maryland politicians gather, such as the July 28 Democratic presidential campaign fund-raiser for Vice President Al Gore in Baltimore, Casper Taylor is easy to miss.

He's not the wavy-maned lawyer with the fast smile. (That would be state Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller.) Nor is he the silver-haired, buttoned-down former college professor at center stage. (That would be Gov. Parris N. Glendening.)

No, this conservative Democrat has been so often likened to a penguin that figurines of the flightless bird have found a home in his State House office — gifts from friends and well-wishers.

Mr. Taylor's methodical, behind-the-scenes style rarely grabs the spotlight, but supporters say it has well served his constituents, if not his political ambitions.

"He's not a showoff," says state Comptroller William Donald Schaefer, who served two terms as governor. "When he makes a speech, it's an intelligent speech. Many politicians, when they make a speech, don't say anything."

On the opening day of the 1999 General Assembly session, Mr. Taylor, 64, said some delegates wrongly believed he had sold out when he urged them not to become deeply divided by the issues of partial-birth abortion and homosexual rights they were about to confront.

His statement was part of his duty as speaker, not a change in his own opposition to abortion and homosexuality, he said.

"Abortion is going to stay legal unless people decide it's not," said Mr. Taylor. "Our role is sometimes not to lead by making law, but by example and moral persuasion."

He was in the minority who voted to ban partial-birth abortions, except to protect the life of the mother. Taking a loving-the-sinner-not-the-sin stance, he backed a measure aimed at protecting homosexuals from discrimination. That bill died in a Senate committee.

Since Democrats and liberals gained more seats in the House last year, Mr. Taylor has had to be more responsive to that part of his party's caucus, says House Republican leader Robert Kittleman, who represents Howard and Montgomery counties.

"I have a trusting relationship with him," Mr. Kittleman says. "I don't always agree, but he gets my respect."

Two years before the 1998 election, Mr. Taylor considered

whether he could be not only the first Western Marylander in 100 years to lead the House as speaker, but the first in 50 years to be elected governor.

But the traits that made him the unanimous choice to lead the House — his ability to mollify factions and build consensus — had not made him a household name outside his Allegany County turf.

More taciturn than telegenic, his gestures at the podium seldom extend beyond puffing air into one cheek, or simply shifting his weight.

Politicians, like himself, who build careers on personal relationships, often find it difficult to run statewide, where thrive the politicians whose messages translate well to images and sound bites.

Still, he proudly recalls, customers at the restaurant and tavern he ran in Cumberland for 35 years called him "Casper the friendly host."

His pride in mountainous Maryland is almost reverential, and he has tirelessly promoted economic development there. His "One Maryland" aid and business-incentive plan, approved this year, expanded that mission to other areas across the state plagued by chronically high unemployment.

He calls himself a "cheerleader" but admits, "There have been fleeting spells when I'd think about the attractiveness of the life of a priest or college professor."

When he was a student himself, Mr. Taylor was torn between pursuing piano at the Peabody Conservatory of Music in Baltimore or continuing his education at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana.

Piano lost — he says he doesn't play anymore and gave his piano to a son long ago. He left Notre Dame in 1956 as his family's first college graduate to return to Cumberland to help in his parents' restaurant.

He never let go of his Catholic faith or a philosophical bent that steered his political studies.

"We can't be successful, long-range, without a faith-based moral system," Mr. Taylor says. "It's absurdity for us to be going through this national attempt to deny God and live in a moral system."

However, he doesn't believe government should be a theoc-



racy.

"There are basically four institutions that dominate our lives: family, school, church and government," Mr. Taylor says. "To the extent they fail, a bigger burden is placed on government."

Where to draw the line?

"Government should do everything possible to strengthen the other institutions . . . not become religion or school or family," Mr. Taylor says.

Once out of school, Mr. Taylor married his high school sweetheart, Polly Young, and started building his family.

Politics waited until their two sons were about to be off to Notre Dame. In 1974 he made his first

bid for the House and won.

He soon found that running the family business had given him practice juggling budgets and pleasing patrons — skills useful also in politics.

He rose to vice chairman of the Economic Matters Committee in 1978 and chairman in 1987.

Mr. Taylor and about half of the 23-member committee drew criticism because they worked on businesses the committee regulates — such as liquor sales, insurance and real estate.

Critics argue such overlaps of personal interest and public duty, though fairly common among state legislators, invite abuse. Politicians argue that, as part-time lawmakers, they need outside work and their experience helps the committee.

Twenty years ago, Mr. Taylor raised a few eyebrows by sharing an apartment with lobbyist Jay Schwartz during the 90-day legislative session. Although Mr. Taylor agreed with the lobbyist more often than not, Mr. Taylor said facts, not friendship, determined his votes.

Last year, after two lawmakers left the General Assembly over conflict-of-interest charges and he personally weathered complaints that he had gone too far for a constituent, Mr. Taylor proposed creating an ethics office to advise lawmakers.

Later he and Mr. Miller, the Senate president, appointed a panel that recommended tightening ethics rules.

Lawmakers chipped away at many of the panel's recommendations, but, in a rare example of arm-twisting, the two men won provisions that eliminated some opportunities for conflict of in-

terest and increased ethics oversight.

Although he'll be 65 in December, Mr. Taylor is not ready to hang his hat year-round in the modest stucco house with the tiny yard where he and his wife reared their sons.

Maryland elects state leaders again in 2002, and Lt. Gov. Kathleen Kennedy Townsend is regarded as having the inside track for the top job. But few expect Cas Taylor will just be watching at the rail.

"The fact is, I can't take my pick, nobody can," he says. "But I continue to yearn to be a part of new leadership in a new century."