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Busch lines up votes for speaker of House

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 by Steven T. Dennis and Thomas Dennison
 Staff Writers

Nov. 13, 2002

 Taylor may consider administration post;
 Kopp's job is safe

Del. Michael E. Busch (D-Dist. 30) of Annapolis has emerged as the clear favorite to succeed Casper R. Taylor Jr. (D-Dist. 1C) of Cumberland as House Speaker -- unless Taylor wins a recount battle against LeRoy E. Myers Jr. (R) of Clear Spring.

"If the recount is such that I won't be back, then there is a clear consensus that Mike Busch be speaker," Taylor said.

Busch, now chairman of the Economic Matters Committee, was also endorsed by his chief rival, Appropriations Committee Chairman Howard P. Rawlings (D-Dist. 40) of Baltimore. The accord short-circuits what could have been a bloody leadership battle that had the potential of splitting the House Democratic caucus. On Thursday, both Rawlings and Busch told The Gazette they were eyeing the speakership, but Busch said he had already lined up the votes.

Busch said he is a bit more progressive than Taylor and opposes slot machines. The personable Busch also is a friend of Republican Gov.-elect Robert L. Ehrlich Jr.; their families vacation together. He said he will keep the existing House leadership team intact.

Taylor told The Gazette that he would seek to stay in state government if he loses but does not want the job of treasurer, which is held by Nancy K. Kopp of Bethesda.

Taylor lost his election by 71 votes out of 11,000 cast and has asked for a recount, which will be complete by the day after Thanksgiving, in time for Dec. 2 vote for speaker by the Democratic House caucus.

'A trophy'

The Maryland Court of Appeals' decision earlier this year to toss out the legislature's redistricting map played a critical role in the Taylor-Myers race. The speaker was running unopposed until the court put Myers into his district, and Myers won about 70 percent of the vote in the Washington County portion of the district, while Taylor won 61 percent in his home Allegany County portion.

"It's obviously the shock of my life," said Taylor, who had predicted an easy victory.

In addition to redistricting, he blamed a campaign of distortions from Republicans and the gun lobby for his likely loss.

"The Republicans from downstate took advantage of the target that the gun lobby created against me by singling me out as a trophy to defeat," Taylor said. "They did it with a tremendous amount of carpetbagger distortions. ... [They] distorted the issue so badly that people in Washington County were convinced that I was singlehandedly trying to confiscate their guns, which was an outrage."

There were other distortions, Taylor said. He was in church in Cumberland the Sunday before the election when a group calling itself the Cumberland Historical Cemetery Society distributed fliers claiming that Taylor backed partial-birth abortions. Taylor, a Catholic, is pro-life.

"The facts are that I have, for the last eight elections, the strongest endorsements of right-to-life groups," Taylor said. "This is what I had to put up with."

He continued, "The Cumberland newspaper is getting calls from nitwits saying LeRoy Myers will be just as good a speaker. These poor bastards actually believed that by voting for him they were voting for speaker."

Instead, if the recount determines that Taylor has lost the election,

Del. Casper R. Taylor Jr. (D-Dist. 1C), the speaker of the House, said he would not seek to replace former Del. Nancy K. Kopp of Bethesda as state treasurer if he loses his recount against Republican LeRoy E. Myers Jr.

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Western Maryland will have lost perhaps its most powerful advocate in 100 years, one known for bringing home the bacon and for his "One Maryland" philosophy that no part of the state should be forgotten in economic development.

Taylor told The Gazette that should he lose, he would seek to continue his public service. "I want to continue making a difference in state government," he said.

Taylor said that speculation that he might find a top job in the Ehrlich administration was "flattering" and that he would like to work in one of the areas that he has made his priorities: health care, economic development or transportation.

Just two weeks ago, Taylor unveiled a comprehensive, business-backed approach to gradually extending health care coverage to the uninsured.