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HEADLINE: Make the port independent, Bentley urges;
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BODY:

Breaking publicly with Transportation Secretary Robert L. Flanagan, former Rep. Helen Delich Bentley told state senators yesterday that the port of Baltimore should be run as an autonomous agency reporting directly to the governor.

Bentley, a staunch advocate of the port for more than 50 years, said the Maryland Port Administration has needs that often are not aligned with those of the state Department of Transportation. Saying her age has given her the freedom to speak her mind, the 81-year-old Republican urged the lawmakers to separate the two agencies.

"The port is a business and needs to be administered as such," Bentley told the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee.

Flanagan, who has asked Bentley to lead the search for a new port administrator, said he disagreed with her position.

He told the senators that there are times when the transportation secretary can interpose himself between port officials and the governor to head off a misstep.

Sen. Ulysses Currie, chairman of the committee, called the hearing to look at the state of the port in the aftermath of the departure of MPA Administrator James White after a series of disputes with Flanagan.

White announced he would leave Feb. 24 after saying he had failed to win Flanagan's respect.

He and Flanagan had clashed over such issues as cuts to the agency's marketing budget and the hiring of MPA officials without White's involvement.

Democratic senators repeatedly pressed Flanagan to explain why Maryland had lost the services of White, who had

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achieved significant gains in port business during his six years as administrator.

"Why wouldn't we have tried to keep a director who served us so well?" Anne Arundel County Sen. James E. DeGrange asked Flanagan.

Flanagan sidestepped explanations of White's departure and urged senators to move off the topic.

He suggested that dwelling on the issue was counterproductive for the port.

"It's time to start talking up the port. It's time to start working in unison," the transportation chief said.

But Sen. George W. Della, a Baltimore Democrat who represents a port-oriented district, said the loss of White jeopardizes the continued success of the port.

"It creates a ripple that turns into a tidal wave throughout the industry," said Della, who, along with Baltimore County Democratic Del. John S. Arnick, has introduced legislation that would make the port administration an autonomous agency.

Outside the hearing, Flanagan continued to criticize that proposal. He said the port administration benefits from having access to the Transportation Trust Fund, which is administered by the department, in good times and bad.

"It is an important insurance policy for the Maryland port," he said.

But Bentley told the senators that Baltimore now is the only major port that answers to two separate levels of government control.

She urged legislators to consider the example of the port of Mobile, Ala., which recently was restructured to give it autonomy and independent bonding authority.

Bentley noted that the port of Baltimore had similar autonomy between 1956 and 1971, when it was rolled into the Transportation Department.

Before the hearing, department officials distributed copies of letters from several port-related businesses praising the performance of two of Ehrlich's appointees to marketing jobs at the MPA.

The seven letters -- six of which were dated Feb. 28 -- gave testimonials to the accomplishments of distribution services manager Michael Geppi and deputy marketing director Joseph S. Guido, both of whom earn more than \$80,000.

Flanagan said the two felt "slandered" by the press coverage of recent letters from some port customers complaining about the quality of the Ehrlich's appointees at the port.

The transportation chief said the two, who he said were hired over White's objections, asked customers who knew them to provide a "positive indicator of the quality of their work."

In one of them, three executives of Baltimore-based Locust Industries wrote that Geppi and Guido had been "professional and helpful in assisting importers who are trying to make a decision on utilizing the Baltimore port rather than a competitive port."

Transportation officials said the letters were distributed to counter an organized form-letter campaign criticizing the Transportation Department's decision to eliminate four marketing positions at the port.

The department released nine essentially identical letters from port businesses -- some bearing obvious signs of an

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orchestrated campaign -- criticizing recent hires for a lack of shipping knowledge.

Flanagan, who told senators the people the administration sent to the port were "fully qualified" for their jobs, said the questions raised about 16 Ehrlich appointees at the MPA had cast a shadow over all the employees.

"They're getting smeared and the Democrats are getting away with it," Flanagan said. "This is a gross injustice to people who are trying to improve state government."

In an interview after his resignation, White said that in many cases, appointees showed up for work at the MPA without his ever seeing their resumes.

"There's a morale problem that we have basically festering in the marketing department where we have skilled people, and then people with no background appointed to be their bosses making more money. It was getting hard for me to keep up morale," White said.

Sun staff writer Meredith Cohn contributed to this article.

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