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HEADLINE: Races for 2 Top Md. Assembly Posts Come to Early End

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BODY:

Two months before Maryland's new 188-member General Assembly takes office, the races for the legislature's top two posts have already ended.

In the contest for House speaker, a nod of support from Gov.-elect William Donald Schaefer and the withdrawal of the House majority leader from Montgomery County have ensured that affable, conservative Eastern Shore Del. R. Clayton Mitchell (D-Kent) will win that post.

Del. Donald B. Robertson, a Montgomery County Democrat considered a longshot to replace departing House Speaker Benjamin L. Cardin (D-Baltimore), agreed this week to throw his support behind Mitchell and to bring Montgomery's entire 13-member delegation to Mitchell's side.

"I decided to support Clay because I felt his support in the House is broader and deeper," said Robertson, whose future role in the leadership is now in question. Mitchell, who has served for four terms, is chairman of the House Appropriations Committee and has earned a reputation as a low-key negotiator.

Prince George's state Sen. Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr., also a Democrat, has had virtually no opposition in his bid to become Senate president. He succeeds Melvin A. Steinberg, a Baltimore County Democrat who was elected lieutenant governor on Schaefer's ticket.

Schaefer's backing of Mitchell and his early participation in the legislature's political wrangling already have caused uneasy rumblings in some state political quarters. With Robertson's role unclear, questions have been raised about how much clout Montgomery will wield when the legislative session begins in January.

Montgomery legislators will "get at least one major inner circle leadership position," said Michael Gordon, the county delegation's newly elected chairman, who also bolted to Mitchell's side when Robertson withdrew from the race.

Mitchell has prepared a letter that will be sent to all delegates this week signed by 75 of his supporters. Only Paul Weisengoff, a wily South Baltimore political veteran, remains in the race, but he conceded yesterday that Schaefer's endorsement coupled with Robertson's withdrawal cost him the position.

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"Don Robertson made it very difficult," Weisengoff said. "I was convinced he was with me."

Leadership positions will be decided when the legislative caucuses meet Dec. 8.

Although Mitchell's path to the speakership appeared to be easy, there has been at least one breakdown in his House sweep in recent days as some of the 22 members of the Legislative Black Caucus complained that they are being shut out of key committee chairmanships, in part because of Schaefer's influence.

Black caucus members agreed yesterday to withhold their support of Mitchell until they are guaranteed a larger leadership role in the House.

At the heart of the dispute is the unclear future of Del. Larry Young, a Baltimore Democrat who was chairman of the House Environmental Matters Committee under Cardin. "The ayatollah has spoken," black caucus chairman Sen. Decatur Trotter (D-Prince George's) said of Schaefer. "And [he says] that they don't want Larry Young."

Instead, Trotter and other elected officials said, Mitchell is promoting caucus members Dels. Elijah Cummings (D-Baltimore) as speaker pro-tem and Howard P. Rawlings (D-Baltimore) as vice chairman of the budget-writing Appropriations Committee.

"I don't think that the mayor should be involved in the policies of the legislature and picking the leadership of the legislature," said Trotter of the four-term Baltimore mayor who has promised to return to a more hands-on style of government when he is inaugurated governor on Jan. 21.

But one caucus member privately expressed concern that the caucus members could be frozen out of a Mitchell-led house by lobbying too hard for Young and not jumping on board with the winning candidate. "You're not going to get influence if you're not going to play the game right," the delegate said.

Meanwhile, Schaefer traveled to Annapolis yesterday for a two-hour meeting with outgoing Gov. Harry Hughes, in which they discussed matters ranging from the savings and loan crisis to the Chesapeake Bay cleanup program. Later they met with reporters and Schaefer reiterated his support for Mitchell. "I support Clay, no question about it."

Staff writer Tom Vesey contributed to this report.

GRAPHIC: Photo, Del. R. Clayton Mitchell is bound for House speaker's post. (R. Clayton Mitchell), AP