

5-30-03

New GOP leaders sought in House

Kach, Edwards compete
for minority leadership
after 2 delegates leave

By TIM CRAIG
SUN STAFF

Republicans in the House of Delegates are scrambling to rebuild their leadership after Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. announced yesterday that the House minority whip will become the next chairman of the Public Service Commission.

Del. Kenneth D. Schisler's appointment as chairman occurs one day after Ehrlich nominated House Minority Leader Alfred W. Redmer Jr. to be Maryland's new insurance commissioner.

The loss of the top two House GOP leaders has touched off an intraparty squabble over who will lead 43 Republican delegates. Del. A. Wade Kach, a retired teacher from Baltimore County, is running against Del. George C. Edwards, a business owner from Garrett County, for the minority leader position.

With both men saying they are conservative but willing to work with Democrats, the race could come down to geography. Each represents a different side of the rural-suburban coalition of voters that propelled Ehrlich to the governor's mansion.

Edwards — with his folksy charm and southern drawl — comes from a rural constituency that has long been one of the GOP's most reliable base of supporters. Kach hails from suburban Baltimore, an area GOP leaders say is critical to building the party's strength in a state that has traditionally been dominated by Dem- [See GOP, 6B]

Public Service appointment

Commission: Del. Kenneth D. Schisler, minority whip in the House of Delegates, is appointed chairman of the Maryland Public Service Commission. [Page 1c]

House GOP to choose new leaders next month

[GOP, from Page 1B]

ocrats.

Some Republicans say Kach could take a harder line when it comes to new taxes, while Edwards could take a stronger stance on issues of concern to rural voters, such as gun control and environmental regulations.

"Both are fine men with long histories and both offer a lot to the caucus," said Del. Jean B. Cryor, a Montgomery County Republican. "I know the phones will be busy because they give us a lot to talk about."

Both candidates say they believe they have the votes needed to win. The election, conducted by secret ballot, has tentatively been scheduled for June 17.

Kach and Edwards both play down the role geography will play in the contest, but the caucus appears split along geographic lines.

All seven of Anne Arundel County Republican delegates have endorsed Kach, while Edwards says he has the support of most of the delegates from Western Maryland.

The candidates will run as a ticket with their choice for minority whip — a job that requires rallying the caucus and attacking the opposition.

Edwards has teamed with Del. Anthony J. O'Donnell of Southern Maryland. Kach has yet to announce his choice for whip, but the speculation among other Republicans is he is searching for a female delegate.

The campaign comes after the GOP picked up eight House seats in the last election and entered the 2003 session with renewed vigor.

The caucus has also grown more conservative, Republicans and Democrats say, with some delegates even challenging Ehrlich when they believe he has drifted from core GOP principles.

For example, all but one of the 43 Republicans in the House

voted against Ehrlich's proposal to raise the state property tax.

"We do have the most conservative caucus I have seen in a long time," said Del. Carmen Amedori, a Carroll County Republican supporting Edwards and O'Donnell.

Amedori thinks Edwards will do a better job of keeping the caucus unified by pushing issues of importance to conservatives.

"Tony and George are not flimsy," Amedori said. "They are not going to be jellyfish. They are going to be tough and they are going to be firm."

But Del. John R. Leopold of Anne Arundel County said he thinks Kach's statesmanlike qualities are what the caucus needs to further the Republican agenda. Kach, a 29-year veteran of the House, is the caucus's senior member.

"He will provide the kind of leadership which is constructive and focused on problem solving," Leopold said. "His candidacy has an appeal to me because of his approach to governance is building bipartisan coalitions."

Ehrlich is staying neutral in the race. When Ehrlich was in the House, he and Kach represented the same northern Baltimore County district. But Ehrlich and Edwards have also had a close working relationship over the years.

Regardless of who wins, the next leaders of the House Republican caucus will be responsible for shepherding the governor's agenda through the legislature.

They will also work to increase the number of Republicans in the House. Although there are twice as many Democrats in the House, Republicans have their biggest numbers in recent history.

Democratic leaders praise Edwards and Kach as competent, well-liked individuals who are assets to the legislature.