

# Pete Rawlings: He was one of a kind

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Pete Rawlings was buried yesterday. He led a remarkable life.

Raised in the housing projects of Baltimore city, he taught college mathematics, raised a family and rose to become the most powerful fiscal leader in the Maryland General Assembly.

He possessed what few lawmakers, past or present, brought to the table. The courage of his convictions, absolute fearlessness, a razor-sharp intellect, superb political instincts and a statewide perspective.

Everyone called him Pete — except those who feared him. They called him "Chairman Rawlings." To people unfamiliar with the Annapolis scene, he could resemble a ferocious, growling bear. To his colleagues, who knew him best, he was really a teddy bear with a soft heart, a big smile, a hardy laugh and a twinkle in his eye.

What set him apart was his willingness to risk unpopularity. If Rawlings concluded that the quest was worth the pain, he would take on the world. He did that in the fight to overhaul Baltimore city's floundering school system.

Despite heavy flak from City Hall, Rawlings demanded audits of the city schools, audits that revealed a bureaucracy in disarray and an out-of-control budgeting system.

He kept the heat on year after year. Officials in Mayor Kurt Schmoke's administration loudly resisted Rawlings' calls for reform. But Rawlings knew

those leading the school system were failing Baltimore's children and deepening Baltimore's woes.

Rawlings refused to relent, even after vows from

Schmoke's political minions to defeat him at election time. He proved the wrong man to threaten.

More than anything, it was pressure from Pete Rawlings that led to a novel state-city partnership in the schools. It marked the beginning of a sharp upward curve in the school system's learning performance.

(Ironically, a former close colleague of Rawlings' in the legislature, Bobby Neall, is now the architect of a tough budget-cutting plan for the school system that could set the stage for even more dramatic advances in Baltimore classrooms. Pete would have loved Neall's courageous effort to impose "truth in budgeting" on the schools.)

Rawlings also took the political

heat from fellow black officials in Baltimore when he stepped out front and endorsed a white man, Martin O'Malley, for mayor of Baltimore, a majority black city. Time has proved Rawlings' political judgment right. O'Malley was far and away the best candidate, and the city has benefited mightily from his leadership.

Long before Bob Ehrlich picked up the mantra of slot machines, Rawlings was sponsoring bills to legalize slots in Maryland, especially in Baltimore city.

It wasn't that the Appropriations Committee chairman liked the idea of expanded gambling. He saw that state and local governments desperately needed a new revenue source to pay for social programs. It seemed a good deal to him. The state could handle the negatives from legalized slots while distressed governments like Baltimore would receive millions to patch the social safety net and improve basic services.

But his colleagues failed to heed Rawlings' advice. By ignoring his logic, the liberal House majority may well wind up next session with deep cuts in social programs and no way — short of slots — to restore those funds.

Rawlings entered the House in 1978 as a city liberal, but quickly grasped that the best lawmakers set parochial concerns aside and view issues from a statewide perspective. Rawlings also learned that if he wanted to rise to the top of the budget committee, he had to say "no" even to his friends and allies. He worked to ensure that government lived within its means.

For a mathematician, it made sense. Balancing the state's income and spending was right up his alley. He preached fiscal responsibility and came down hard on those who overspent or mismanaged. He even took on his alma mater, Morgan State University, in a prolonged and nasty dispute concerning management at the state college. Rawlings refused to relent in his criticisms, which infuriated the school's leaders.

Of course, the Baltimore delegate found ways to direct more money to programs for the poor, especially in his city. But this, too, came with a statewide slant: The vast majority of Maryland's poor, addicts and crime victims live in Baltimore. Fix the city's problems and Maryland vastly improves its future; ignore these problems and Maryland could suffer for decades due to vastly higher health-and-welfare expenses and diminished economic growth.

Pete Rawlings can't be replaced. This generation of legislators is sorely lacking in fearlessness and courage. There isn't enough political wizardry and acumen. There isn't enough statewide thinking. It's an uninspiring group of senators and delegates.

Compounding this situation is Maryland's bleak fiscal picture. The state needs a Pete Rawlings. Yet there's no one on the immediate horizon. Pete was truly *sui generis* — one of a kind.

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