

# Pete Rawlings: Risk-taker, leader, educator, visionary

By C. FRASER SMITH

WHEN 1,000 MORGAN State University students marched in Annapolis to protest his decision to delay funds for a new library, Pete refused to cave.

Morgan did not need the money that year, he thought. It was a tight budget year, and he couldn't afford politically to reward his city and his alma mater when so many other financial requests were on hold.

He said no. He said no to his own city, and not for the first time. He said no to anyone who might have thought — or charged — that he was turning aside the needs of black students. (Full funding was granted the following year.)

While others delighted in the spectacle of a 1960s-style student uprising, he wondered if they had noticed the new reality.

Howard Peters Rawlings, who died Friday morning, had extraordinary political skills. He had become a master of the process with constituencies in Baltimore — but also in Annapolis, where a majority of the other 187 legislators would be needed on any given bill, not to mention the revolutionary measures he had in mind.

An African-American who grew up in the Baltimore projects, he moved up to the table where the big financial decisions were made — on a \$3 million planning grant to Morgan or a \$1.3 billion education bill. Few Marylanders ever had so much power and influence.

Some people found him cranky or arrogant or dismissive, and he would, feigning humility with a sly grin, agree.

"He got very frustrated when he thought people were not demanding enough of themselves or of others," said state Treasurer Nancy K. Kopp, his colleague for years in the House of Delegates. "To demand less than the best he thought was demeaning." She called him "the most courageous, determined, committed man I ever knew."

Yet state legislators, even those called powerful in the newspaper, can be all but anonymous. The best problem-solvers among them — and Pete Rawlings was as good as any — get little recognition. Until his last election, when he led the ticket, he often ran second or third in his Northwest Baltimore district.

He could have given Morgan the money it wanted. It would have been easier.

"He never did things the easy

way," said Del. Maggie L. McIntosh. "He'd say, 'Just hang on. When you're along with me it's quite a ride.'"

His name might well have been engraved on the historic Thornton Commission aid-to-education plan adopted last year by the General Assembly. That legislation illustrated the value of the savvy, experienced, determined legislative strategist.

Many in the Assembly — Mr. Rawlings included — thought voting for Thornton was irresponsible. There was no bankable prospect for paying the \$1.3 billion bill. But Mr. Rawlings knew the opportunity might not come again. Political power was shifting away from him. Another year might bring a weaker bill. So, he told House Speaker Casper R. Taylor Jr., if the money isn't there we'll have a provision that allows for a lower level of support. It was a fig leaf to cover the reality, but the bill passed.

He was not a fan of slot machine gambling, but he backed it because he was fearful that money for Thornton would be impossible to find otherwise. If he didn't support the revenue-raising potential of slots, how could he ask his colleagues to vote for higher taxes? If he did back slots — and slots weren't

enough — he was on stronger footing on the tax question.

He was a man whose risk-taking led him to support Martin O'Malley for mayor of Baltimore against two black candidates. He took on Sen. Clarence M. Mitchell IV, a member of the famous Mitchell family of civil rights fame, and won, helping to elect Verna L. Jones to replace Mr. Mitchell.

He supported Sen. Lisa A. Gladden over former Sen. Barbara A. Hoffman, arguing that a new generation of black leadership had to be served. If that was racial politics, he seemed to say, so be it.

His power in the Assembly and Democratic politics made him a force in the construction of a splendid monument to Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall on Lawyers Mall outside the State House. A picture taken on the day of its dedication by his friend and colleague, Del. Samuel I. "Sandy" Rosenberg, hung in Mr. Rawling's office. The engraved words "equal justice" were plainly visible.

Some in the Assembly wanted to tear down the statue of Roger Brooke Taney, the high court justice from Maryland who wrote the *Dred Scott* decision, asserting that the black man has

no rights a white man must respect. Delegate Rawlings said no. Justice Taney, he said, is a part of Maryland history.

Now, for wholly different reasons, that is true now of the man

everyone called Pete.

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