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Rawlings has power, but budget is weak

Baltimore delegate to head committee.

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As his father lay near death two months ago, Baltimore Del. Howard P. Rawlings hurried to the hospital to share news that would make the elderly man proud.

"He blinked his eyes when I told him that the son he raised in the Edgar Allan Poe projects had become chairman of the Appropriations Committee," Mr. Rawlings says softly, adding that he thinks his father understood.

Mr. Rawlings' appointment in

September as the first black to head a major money committee in Maryland's General Assembly is the capstone of a remarkable, almost unintended, political career.

The 55-year-old, four-term Democrat from West Baltimore has fought for years for civil rights, for jobs and affordable housing. Now, he finds himself in a powerful position to do something about the problems that face his impoverished constituents and his financially distressed city.

The trouble is, there's little money left with which to do anything.

Mr. Rawlings takes control of Appropriations after nearly three years of budgetary retrenchment. Moreover, the man who put him in



AMY DAVIS/STAFF PHOTO

Delegate Rawlings is in a position to help the poor and the financially strapped city, but money is scarce.

the job, House Speaker R. Clayton Mitchell Jr., is a conservative Eastern Shoreman who wants to shrink state government even fur-

ther.

Instead of pushing for programs

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to improve the lot of welfare mothers or fight violent crime, Mr. Rawlings may find himself having to cut such programs, or at best trying to defend them from further reductions.

"I know what the realities are. I know there will be some pain," he says, fully aware he will now play a key role in deciding how that pain is distributed. "But I just don't believe the pain ought to be disproportionate to some communities."

He already is in the thick of a fight with suburban Washington counties over a plan to eliminate a \$147 million state program that pays Social Security taxes for teachers, librarians and community college employees.

The reduction, which will be pushed at this week's special legislative session, is a key element of the governor's broader plan to erase a \$450 million deficit.

Baltimore officials are not fighting the loss of the Social Security program because alternatives could hurt the city even more.

It is only a matter of time, however, before Mr. Rawlings is forced to choose between something he or his city wants, but that the House leadership does not.

Then, say some of his many admirers, it will depend on which Mr. Rawlings shows up.

One is an independent, compassionate legislator who helped found

the Low Income Housing Coalition, the Maryland Education Coalition, the Maryland Alliance for the Poor and the Legislative Black Caucus.

The other is the pragmatic, deft politician who can be nimbly evasive when needs dictate and who, they say, ultimately will do whatever his boss or circumstances require.

It was Mr. Rawlings, for example, who — at Mr. Mitchell's direction — led a House subcommittee through a difficult round of cuts to the Medicaid budget, trimming more than \$30 million from a program that directly benefits many of his city constituents.

"He's going to do what he's told," predicts a cynical Del. Louis L. DePazzo, a Baltimore County Democrat and Appropriations seatmate of Mr. Rawlings.

Mr. Rawlings bristles at the suggestion he will blindly take orders. But he says he recognizes he has to represent interests of the entire state, not just Baltimore or his 40th Legislative District.

"Anyone who knows Pete Rawlings knows I'm not a take-order kind of person," he says. "I'm aware the speaker is the speaker, and give deference to that fact. But the speaker knows — and the governor knows — I will argue for and defend persons who are too often left out of our discussions."

He predicts Mr. Mitchell will listen to him. The inner-city black educator and the rural white gentleman

farmer have been friends since Mr. Rawlings arrived as a freshman in 1979.

Mr. Rawlings served under Mr. Mitchell when the speaker was the Appropriations chairman, later supported him for speaker over a rival candidate from Baltimore and recommended him to then-Mayor William Donald Schaefer as a potential gubernatorial running mate in 1986.

Mr. Rawlings seems almost bemused by his own rise to power. He never intended to become involved in politics, and his upbringing never prepared him for it.

His father quit high school and later worked as a custodian and postal employee. But he worked, a trait not lost on his son.

"That was important," he recalls. "All the men [at the Poe Homes] were working. I don't remember a father who didn't have a job."

About the worst thing people say about Mr. Rawlings now is that he sometimes uses his legislative position to squeeze anyone he can for jobs for fellow blacks.

Most recently, he and other black lawmakers were criticized for heavy-handed lobbying for a black-run company that is trying to retain the state's lucrative vehicle emissions-testing contract.

"That's the worst?" Mr. Rawlings asks with mock astonishment. "Please write that in your article."

He says without hint of apology: "I think that is very responsible behavior."

People complain about crime, or lack of stability in the black family, or of high pregnancy rates, or teenage dropouts. To me, that is all attributable to a lack of an economy.

"I'm angry that more aren't pressing for more economic activity. I'm doing the state a service," he adds. "It so happens that the people I represent are in dire need of jobs."

The quest for jobs is the glue that holds together much of what Pete Rawlings is about. His colleagues praise his statewide perspective, saying he is as likely to back a tourist-attracting golf course in the Western Maryland mountains as he is a high technology project in the Washington suburbs.

"He's one of our best allies," says Walt Plosila, president of the Suburban Maryland Technical Council, which represents suburban Washington counties.

His interest in technology stems in part from his training as a mathematician, an aptitude that has opened doors throughout his life. It carried him through Morgan State and a master's degree from the University of Wisconsin.

He now is assistant to the president of Baltimore City Community College, a job that could present a conflict of interest when the state-financed school's budget comes before his committee.

His involvement in politics took root from an almost naive recognition of racial discrimination.

As a math instructor at Morgan State, he was stunned when several of his best students were denied national scholarships. He suspected race was the motive. That awareness blossomed, he says, when he moved to the University of Maryland Baltimore County and realized how few blacks were on the faculty. The bus that could have brought black students from Baltimore to the predominantly white school stopped a mile short of the campus.

He helped form the UMBC Black Caucus of Faculty and Staff, a movement that would become a system-wide black caucus within the University of Maryland and ultimately lead to a successful challenge of the state's college-desegregation plans.

Mr. Rawlings eventually became head of a health-advocacy group, a job that took him to Annapolis. There, he realized he could accomplish more on the inside.