

# Rawlings holds sway despite cancer battle

**Leader:** The Baltimore delegate has continued in his prominent political position while receiving chemotherapy to shrink a lung tumor.

By DAVID NITKIN  
SUN STAFF

The desk of Del. Howard P. Rawlings is a one-stop shopping center for nearly every important public policy issue facing Maryland.

In just the past few months, the Baltimore Democrat's rumbling voice has led debate on topics as diverse and divisive as preservation of African-American political influence, creation of a better school-funding formula and legalization of slot machines.

"He's obviously a singular leader," said House Speaker Casper R. Taylor Jr. "He's the House's leader on the budget. He's clearly a senior Baltimore leader and a senior black leader. He wears many hats."

There is one hat, however, that Rawlings would prefer to leave in the closet.

It is the knit cap he dons daily, a web of yarn that covers a skull left bare by treatment of a shrinking but still-dangerous cancer.

On the day before the General Assembly session started this month, Rawlings, 64, sat in a doctor's office and received the final dose of a three-drug regimen to combat a disease that started in his bladder and has spread to his lung.

Hours later, he was back at a familiar spot he has occupied for a decade, shepherding billions of dollars in taxpayer money as chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, one of the most powerful posts in the legislature.

"A lot of people say I look very good, although looks are deceiving," Rawlings said. "I've been doing well in tolerating chemotherapy."

Rawlings had been reluctant to talk publicly about his health since his latest round of treatment began last summer. But as his 24th legislative session gets under way, he has changed his mind, cognizant of his prominent role in city and state affairs.

"He [See Rawlings, 9A]



BARBARA HADDOCK TAYLOR: SUN STAFF

*"I don't think I've skipped a beat."*

**Del. Howard P. Rawlings**, on his ability to conduct legislative business while undergoing treatment for cancer

# Leader unswayed by illness

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knows that a lot is depending on him and his leadership," said Joan Scott, an aide since 1992.

She notes that Rawlings has skipped a few social engagements but typically keeps a full schedule that can begin with a 7:30 breakfast meeting and end after 9 p.m. "It helps him because he doesn't sit there and say 'I'm in pain,' or whatever. He's just totally positive about the end result."

Rawlings' illness has come at a sensitive juncture for his hometown. As the once-a-decade legislative redistricting process makes clear, Baltimore — one of the fastest-shrinking cities in the nation — is at grave risk of losing its political influence and the resources that go with it.

Acknowledging population shifts, Gov. Parris N. Glendening has proposed relocating two state Senate districts and their accompanying delegates from the Baltimore region to the Washington area. The move means that the state's largest city will be more dependent than ever on a handful of leaders — Rawlings chief among them.

The former college math instructor is working against odds to fulfill his responsibility.

"It reminds you of your mortality, and your friends," he said. "And it also reinforces how grounded I am with regard to my family."

For this article, Rawlings allowed his doctor, Martin J. Edelman of the Greenebaum Cancer Center at the University of Maryland Medical System, to discuss his condition and prognosis.

Rawlings' cancer was first diagnosed in his bladder about three years ago. Localized tumors were removed during five surgeries.

By last July, however, the disease had spread and was in its most advanced form, Edelman said. Rawlings began treatment with a relatively new combination of drugs — taxol, gemcitabine and methotrexate — designed to kill malignant cells while minimizing side effects such as fatigue and nausea.

He has responded remarkably well.

"He had an over 6-centimeter mass in his lung," Edelman said, about the size of a small orange. After two days of chemotherapy treatment every three weeks — "most of which time he spends on the cell phone, talking to people," Edelman said — the growth appears virtually gone. CAT scans reveal only scar tissue, the doctor said.

"I'm optimistic that at least for a period of time, he could go without further treatment," the doctor said. That period, he said, could be a year or more.

As for the prospect of a complete recovery, "I'd say that's probably a 1-in-20 chance here, at best," Edelman said. "The fact is this is a disease that is usually fatal. However, the people who do well, do well. ... I expect he probably will relapse with the disease, and we'll treat that."

No one would blame Rawlings

for scaling back commitments as he tries to get better.

He could have begged off the Thornton Commission, the panel that recently completed its two-year review of equity in education. He could have ignored the drafts of legislative redistricting maps that will affect Maryland's political future for at least a decade.

He didn't.

The same day he underwent a treatment session in August, Rawlings strode into Baltimore City Hall to unveil a city legislative map that attempted to keep five African-American state senators. But in a now famous moment, he lashed out at one of his colleagues, Sen. Clarence M. Mitchell IV.

"I want to make it clear that he is the most despicable senator we have," Rawlings said. "I am not arguing to save Mitchell. I am arguing to save a district."

As it turns out, Mitchell now faces the political fight of his life and likely will see challenges from several popular lawmakers if he tries to keep his seat.

"I don't think I've skipped a beat," Rawlings said.

"If he is weakened physically, he's not weakened in stature," said Del. Nathaniel T. Oaks, a Baltimore Democrat sometimes at odds with Rawlings' views. "He knows how to play the game extremely well."

As long as he remains Appropriations chairman, illness alone cannot sap his power, Oaks said. "You don't get elected in Annapolis. You get elected back home," he said. "And he's the guy that helps you bring the goodies back home."

But Rawlings does more than dole out pork.

He is known for principled stands on a range of issues. He is a passionate advocate for African-American positions, while at the same time drawing the ire of African-Americans throughout the state.

In 1997, he withstood criticism from Baltimore ministers and his own relatives when he fought for a management overhaul of the city's schools, along with increased funding.

It was perhaps his most notable legislative accomplishment: the formation of a coalition of Baltimore, Baltimore County and rural legislators who agreed to pump \$254 million over five years into city classrooms. The measure passed over the objections of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and other critics, who said the reforms meant that Baltimore would become "a colony of the state."

He called for audits of historically black Morgan State University. More recently, he has lobbied for a restructuring of Prince George's County schools, a position that draws complaints of meddling. He was an early and important backer of the mayoral campaign of Martin O'Malley.

"Pete has his own focus, his own way of looking at things, and most times he's right," said Del. Talmadge Branch, the Baltimore Democrat who heads the legislative Black Caucus. "When he takes

an important position, he knows why. He's careful and he's meticulous. Once he makes his decision, it's final."

The son of a postal worker, Rawlings was born March 17, 1937, and grew up in the then-new Edgar Allan Poe Homes public housing complex on North Fremont Street.

The quality of life there, he once told *The Sun*, cemented his commitment toward housing, one of his early legislative missions.

"My life was changed because of the availability of housing that was of good quality," he said. "It was a direct result of government action."

He has championed causes big and small. In 1985, he was arrested at a protest in front of the South African Embassy in Washington. He was supporting a General Assembly measure preventing state universities from investing funds in the segregated nation.

Closer to home, he has tucked money in the state budget for Druid Hill Park. A dormitory at Morgan State bears his name.

Rawlings has struggled with health problems before, notably obesity and related conditions. He used to enter contests with other lawmakers to see who could shed the most pounds during the 90-day legislative session. For Rawlings, the scale rarely budged.

But his weight became a more serious concern in 1994, when he began nodding off during important meetings and dinners. He was found to have obstructive sleep apnea. Doctors theorized that excess flesh around his throat may have been constricting oxygen flow while he slept, jerking him out of a natural sleep cycle. He shed 50 pounds and used a machine to force oxygen into his lungs.

Other family members have also faced health troubles. Rawlings' daughter, Baltimore City Council Vice President Stephanie C. Rawlings Blake, recounted how her mother, Nina, was found to have breast cancer in 1992 and survived.

"My mother is very pragmatic and the less emotional of the two. She's a physician. She understood the science of cancer, and beating cancer," Blake said. "I guess if my mom would have fallen apart, it would have given him a little more license to feel more sorry for himself. But because my mom was strong, it probably gave him a map of how to get through it."

Blake said her father has handled his ordeal "better than I ever could have imagined."

Already planning for the future, Rawlings says he is running for reelection, and held a major fundraiser this month. He's also complaining about the volume of work that will consume him for the next three months.

That, says his daughter, is normal.

"He always starts off the session by saying, 'There is so much to do, and so much on my plate,'" Blake said.

"After he's successful," she said, "that will give way ... to how much he's done."