

Different priorities before Annapolis

Sun Opinion 1.10.01

House Speaker Casper R. Taylor Jr. spoke recently at The Sun with Richard C. Gross, editor of the *Opinion* ■ Commentary page, about the 2001 session of the legislature, which opens today.

What's the major problem facing the legislature when the new session begins?

The major problem is fiscal. ... [Gov. Parris N. Glendening] has very strong priorities in the fields of education, particularly higher education, and transportation and Smart Growth and public safety. The legislature has some priorities that are different than the governor's, and we are going to restructure some of those priorities and arrive at a conclusion.

What's your No. 1 priority in the legislature that's different from the governor's?

It might be investment in additional health care.

What would you like to do with health care?

We have the resources available to take access to health care a major step forward by using the federal Medicaid program [to help] expand CHIP [the Children's Health Insurance Program] to the CHIP parents so that they get coverage. ... But it probably will require a maximum \$40 million, \$50 million.

What needs to be done with mass transit, considering Maryland's already in gridlock and will grow by 1.5 million people within the next 15 years?

The ultimate answer requires us to create a separate revenue stream for mass transit and highways. Every other mass transit state in the nation has long since done that. Up to this point, we have not found a way to do it.

Does that mean more taxes?

Not necessarily, but in the long run it probably will mean more taxes because we already know that we've got at least \$27 billion worth of unmet transportation infrastructure needs.

Mass transit cannot be successfully funded out of the same revenue stream as highways. It's fair [for] users [to fund] highways, and the gasoline tax and the motor vehicle excise tax do just that. The fairest way to fund mass transit is with a universal [tax] base covering the areas of mass transit in the state, and that gets us to the sales tax base. Eighty percent of our Maryland sales tax revenue comes from the same region of the state that mass transit is most heavily used in.

What region is that?

It's the urban, suburban area of the state. ... The two Beltway areas of the state are the core, and it radiates out into those surrounding suburbs. And that area of the state generates 80 percent of our sales tax.

You said that we need a regional transportation authority for cooperation among Washington, Virginia and Maryland. Why?

Primarily because transportation infrastructure doesn't stop at any state line. It can't. It's interstate by its very nature and, therefore, to make sense out of a long-range infrastructure strategy for transportation, you have to include the D.C. area of Maryland, northern Virginia and the District of Columbia.

How is that going to improve things for the commuter?

It's going to create commuter transit that crosses all those boundaries.

What are you expecting in the way of improvements in education in the coming year?

I'm expecting us to enhance K-12 education in the areas of special education, in the area of transportation, in the area of academic intervention. Perhaps in some graduated way in the area of kindergarten and in the area of the "One Maryland" distressed jurisdictions.

What are you going to do about the parole and probation problems in the criminal justice system?

I wish I knew what we're ultimately going to come out with as a program. But that's at the end of the process.

We're going to start the process in January by having the appropriate legislative committees working with the governor [and] taking a very hard look at how we must reform parole, probation, sentencing, housing and rehabilitation of our criminal population to solve some of these horrendous problems that have particularly surfaced in recent times so that we can create a safer Maryland.