Next 3 months could change everything for Md. speaker

Taylor enters session with course set for Glendening challenge

By DEBBIE M. PRICE SUNSTAFF 1.26.97

CUMBERLAND — "Speaker! Speaker!" Children's voices blend high and sweet with the man's deeper tones.

The cries echo over the frozen ground of Rocky Gap State Park, pinging from the hills, skittering across drained Lake Habeeb, bouncing, one imagines, from the raw gray concrete of the 250-room hotel rising in the distance. "Speaker ... Speaker ... Speaker...

As if on cue, Casper R. Taylor Jr., speaker of the House of Delegates, climbs onto a picnic table. Arms akimbo, he commands, "Speaker, get over here!"

Ah, there is another Speaker, a 7-month-old golden retriever as unruly and wild as his master is restrained. The dog runs like a maniac while the man who is also called "Speaker" watches, aggravation and resignation struggling for control of his oh-so-ordinary features.

Taylor is not used to being ignored, but he hasn't survived 22 years of the roughand-tumble of Annapolis without learning how to pick his battles. The family portrait will be made without the canine member.

Taylor has suggested this spot in Rocky Gap State Park in Allegany County for the photograph, and the picture that emerges is telling. This corner of Western Maryland is Taylor's world: The hotel under construction on the lakeshore and the golf course growing from an ugly scar across the mountain are his progeny, just as surely as are the three grandchildren chasing the namesake dog.

None of it came easily or quickly, but that is the story of his life.

At 62, Taylor has become one of the three most powerful people in Maryland government, sharing in a triumvirate with the governor and the president of the Senate. The speaker enters his fourth—and likely toughest

— session of the General Assembly, fighting for his tax plan amid a jumble of tax-cut proposals.

From the outset, Taylor has pitted his plan against a tax-cut proposal submitted by Gov. Parris N. Glendening. And the tax plans are not all that compete. Taylor is one of several possible Democratic challengers to Glendening; it's no secret that he wants the job.

The next three months could change everything—or nothing.

One more story

Taylor is sitting in the living room of his three-story stucco home on Prince George Street in Cumberland, where he has lived for more than 30 years, talking about philosophy and his days at the University of Notre Dame. His wife, Polly, whose given name, Mary, has disappeared from all but financial disclosure forms, has served lunch and vanished into the kitchen with the practice of 40 years.

"I'm cranked up, and I have to tell you one more story," he says.

I had a metaphysics professor, the story begins. His name was Father Tom Brennan

The thing that frees us, Brennan told the class, is the ability to distinguish between the de facto and the de jure, what is and what can be. Even if you can't do anything about the difference, Brennan said, knowing the difference gives you freedom. Otherwise, you are a slave to the de facto.

What, Taylor asked Brennan, do you do when you know the difference?

Commit yourself to another person and to a purpose. "And that," Brennan said, "will carry you through a lifetime of looking at the difference between what is and what can be."

"I'd like to think I've lived by that," Taylor says quietly.

This story, perhaps more than any other, explains the man.

Certainly, Taylor did return to Cumberland, and he did marry high school sweetheart Polly, and they did raise two sons, Dane, 39, a lawyer, and Brendan, 38, an architect. For a time, Taylor went into the family business, running the modest restaurant on Mechanic Street in north Cumberland.

But he could see the difference between reality and possibility, and it drove him. It drove him to enter politics, to snare hundreds of millions of dollars for Allegany County, to champion for 10 years the conference center and golf course in Rocky Gap State Park, to grab the speaker's brass ring.

"Now I'm ambitious, but Cas ..." former Gov. William Donald Schaefer says of several projects Taylor supported over the years. "It was Cas' personality that saved [Rocky Gap]."

In a way, Taylor's whole life has been about rewriting reality.

His father was "the most popular man in town" in his son's eyes. "You'll never be your father," folks told the introverted young Casper. "It was always thrown up to me," he says.

Even today, when Taylor walks into a room filled with strangers, he gets that momentary twinge of shyness.

At Notre Dame, Taylor, the first in his family to go to college, was elected president of the Academy cont

of Political Science, a sweet first taste of political power. But when he confided his political aspirations to his parents and their friends, they told him that he was "too sensitive" to enter the public

"You're not thick-skinned enough," they said. "That world

will eat you up.'

Their assessment did not slow him down. But it was, in many

ways, accurate.

"I do get hurt," he says of criticism, an admission that comes as no surprise to members of the press corps who have been on the receiving end of a Taylor critique.

Above all, Taylor wants to be liked. Everything he does, everything he is, he says, is motivated

by a desire for approval.

"I crave acceptance, and I crave appreciation," Taylor says bluntly. "I'm willing to go as far out of my way as possible to be accepted and commended."

Image belies the power

On opening day of the General Assembly, Taylor walks, shoulders hunched, head jutting forward, through the standing ovation to take the rostrum. He speaks slowly, almost monotonously, outlining his vision for the session and a new state tax system. Nothing in his plodding and professorial demeanor telegraphs the power he holds.

But his authority as the speaker of the House is vast. The speaker appoints the committee chairs, assigns legislation to committees and sets the agenda for the House, effectively determining whether Marylanders will have higher or lower taxes, new football stadiums or wider roads.

"The speaker," as Baltimore County Executive C.A. Dutch Ruppersberger notes, "is one of the most powerful people in the state if he plays his cards right."

As speaker, Taylor has engendered the respect of his peers. He cultivates alliances, does his homework and listens. He is, they say, a master at pushing projects over the goal line.

"There is not a major project or proposal in Annapolis that succeeds without Cas Taylor's consensus-building talents," says Del. Peter Franchot, a Montgomery County Democrat.

People may not always agree with him, but there is the sense that at the end of the day, all voices will have been heard.

"Is everybody in the boat?" Taylor said so many times during negotiations over health care reform in 1993 that the boat quote became a standing joke among legislators. In fact, the Economic Matters Committee room, where Taylor was chairman at the time. was a Noah's Ark of high-dollar lobbyists for the insurance and medical industries, all jockeying for advantage, all fearful that the flood waters of reform would wipe them out.

Implicit in Taylor's query was the understanding that those not in the boat could drown.

"In the end, most of these people decided to shut up and get in the boat for fear of being left out entirely," says Del. D. Bruce Poole, a Hagerstown Democrat who voted against the health care reform bill.

As Timothy F. Maloney, a former Prince George's County delegate, notes, "Cas Taylor had the strength and the determination to make it happen when a lot of people never thought it could."

Taylor, meanwhile, casts himself as a moderator, the "little dog" among the "big dogs" of the Baltimore and Washington suburban areas. But make no mistake: The little dog has teeth.

"I don't think people should be misled into thinking he's some kind of softy," says Baltimore Mayor Kurt L. Schmoke. "He's tough."

It is widely acknowledged that Taylor's "no go" is all it takes to kill a bill. Often, though, Taylor will suggest Plan B, as he did when Schmoke approached him with a proposal for a meal tax in Baltimore to fund promotion and debt service for the new convention center.

"I was met with a cool silence," says Schmoke. "Clearly, it was a signal to me that ... there were complications that I hadn't seen."

Taylor, who believed that the tax would "drive away tourists," returned to Schmoke with a suggestion to couple a more modest hotel tax increase with a one-yearonly dip into state Motor Vehicle Administration user fees.

The approach was "typical Cas" - moderate, just enough to get the job done.

Not a headline-grabber

Moderation, though, does not grab headlines. In the free-wheeling political arena, witty one-liners and slam-dunk personal attacks get the 30-second sound bites. In that world, Taylor is often relegated to second billing, the straight man to the quotable Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller.

At a breakfast sponsored by the Baltimore lawyer-lobbyist firm of Rifkin, Livingston, Levitan & Silver in December, Miller spoke first and pounded on Glendening, grabbing front-page headlines the next morning. Taylor, plowing through a detailed explanation of his tax reform plan, joked that following Miller was like stepping up to the plate after the Orioles' Brady Anderson.

"The anecdote is that there are no anecdotes," says Franchot. asked to recall Taylor's most famous moments. "There are no tirades, no shoe-pounding bombast. None of that stuff that makes good stories.

Taylor is, for want of a better description, ordinary. He visits the grandchildren, putters in the garden and — on doctors' orders since quadruple heart bypass surgery in 1995 — walks with Speaker the dog. He lives modestly in Cumberland, the speaker's \$39,700 salary his sole income since selling his restaurant in 1992. Polly works part time as a fund-raiser for Allegany College.

For Taylor, the components are

simple: work and family.

He lives and breathes legislation. These days, it is impossible to have a conversation with Taylor that doesn't turn to the reality of Maryland's "broken" state income tax system and the possibilities for its repair. He tirelessly repeats: Cut the high income tax rate; broaden the narrow sales tax

It sounds simple, but in taking on tax reform, he is taking a political risk.

"Taylor is right," one politician said after Taylor's speech on the opening day of the session, "but he really should have waited to bring it up. Everything he does now looks like he's running for governor."

Responds Taylor: "I'm convinced in my heart that this tax reform is the right thing to do at this time. If I can pull it off, I'll feel good. If I can't pull it off, I'm not going to feel defeated."

think it's a sign of weakness on his part to enter into a true partner-ship and show respect for the legislative branch," the speaker says. Then, considering his words, he adds, "I really do hope we're not starting down that path — Taylor vs. Glendening."

But the course has been set, and set by Taylor himself, who acknowledges that he has hired advisers and is seriously contemplat-

ing a run for governor.

He will make the decision, he says, after the General Assembly session.

Glendening, asked about his relationship with Taylor, cites differences with the speaker on the very issues that make Taylor most vulnerable in a statewide race — opposition to abortion, opposition to gun control, support for gambling.

For Taylor, undeterred by a small electoral base in Western Maryland, the "only question is whether the Democrats are ready to fire the current governor."

"Let's put it this way: If I get into it, I feel absolutely sure I have the ability to win." Then, in his typically cautious way, he adds, "I want to make sure I don't get mesmerized into it or that I don't get intoxicated by all the people wanting me to run."

Constructed his career

In fact, the question for Taylor may not be what Glendening does but whether he is willing to risk the speaker's job.

"The biggest thing for Cas is that he's a very thoughtful, skilled politician who has step by step constructed his career to be speaker of the House," says Poole. "He's a guy who ... has waited his time."

The time came in the dead of night in November 1993, and Taylor struck with coldblooded resolve

Speaker R. Clayton Mitchell Jr. had suddenly announced his resignation. Taylor was not deterred that the House leadership wanted to name someone else as interim speaker: Speaker Pro Tem Gary R. Alexander, his close friend and vice chairman on Economic Matters.

As Taylor recalls, as soon as he learned that Mitchell was planning to resign, he and his allies began lining up the votes. By the time the House leadership convened to consider Mitchell's replacement, Taylor knew he had it.

"I knew it was now or never," Taylor says.

He told his friend Alexander, "I'm definitely running, and I've

got the votes."

The next day Alexander bowed out. Now a lobbyist, he says that he never really wanted to be an interim speaker and that Taylor's selection was the right one.

"I knew instinctively that this was it," Taylor says, unintentionally summing up his whole career: "I either did it and stuck with it or life would pass me by."