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An Outsider on the Inside Track

GOP Leader Vernon Boozar Seated at Power Lunch Table

BY TOM JOHNSON

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Every Wednesday around noon, state Sen. Barbara A. Hoffman, D-Balto. City/County, rounds up select leaders of her Senate Budget and Taxation Committee for a casual chat over lunch.

Munching on brown bag sandwiches, lawmakers engage in a candid discussion of the pertinent issues facing the powerful committee — a conversation historically reserved for the ears of the Assembly's controlling Democratic committee members.

Yet every week, Senate Minority Leader F. Vernon Boozar pulls his chair to the table in an act of inclusion rarely seen in the world of modern-day partisan politics.

Assigned last January to fill late Anne Arundel County Sen. John A. "Jack" Cade's leadership role as the Senate's top Republican, the soft-spoken, 62-year-old conservative quickly earned the respect of his colleagues on both sides of the isle.

Although his quiet style is a contrast to the boisterous, 300-pound Cade, Boozar has emerged as a consummate behind-the-scenes player on major issues. He's also a steadfast ally of both the legal and business communities, which hold in high regard his ability to build a consensus across party lines.

"I sat next to [Cade] for eight years," Boozar recalls. "I used to tell him he was my kind of legislator. He was rough and gruff, but he was really a softie inside."

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KELLY BURNS

State Senate Republican F. Vernon Boozar has spent his career playing the loyal opposition to the Democratic majority in Annapolis. But these days, the Senate Minority Leader is considered one of the gang on the powerful Budget and Taxation Committee.

Boozer

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"But Jack could always walk across the isle and I think I can do that too. I try and understand the other side's viewpoint. Otherwise, what happens to the legislature is you get gridlocked."

"Vernon generally has been a very good vote for business," said Champe McCulloch, president of the Maryland Chamber of Commerce. "He's easy to work with and is especially interested in small business."

"Of course, every now and then he gets off on an issue we think is wrong-headed," McCulloch chided, referring to Boozer's support of a comparative fault bill being pushed by the Maryland Trial Lawyers Association.

Still, McCulloch's group awarded Boozer one of its "Best In Class" honors at its annual convention last October for his work on the state's 10 percent personal income tax cut proposal — and deservedly so.

Breaking logjams

When the tax cut debate had seemingly reached an impasse late in last year's session, leaders on both sides acknowledge that Boozer crafted and garnered support for a plan to phase in a 10-percent cut over five years, breaking the logjam and scoring a major win for Maryland business leaders.

This year, he's trying for a repeat performance.

With the state accumulating a multimillion surplus, Boozer has teamed with State Sen. Robert Neall, R-Anne Arundel, to push an expansion of that tax cut by an additional 5 percent, bringing it in-line with the business community's original goal of 15 percent.

Senate Democratic leaders have yet to get on board with the plan, preferring instead to use the surplus to accelerate the current phase-in. But, given past history, many believe the two sides will be walking in lockstep by session's end.

"Vernon has been a dream to work with," said Hoffman. "He's stepped into some very big shoes and really done well."

Legislative career

First elected to the House of Delegates in 1970, Boozer has run the gamut of positions and committee assignments during nearly a 30-year legislative career.

A lawyer by trade, he originally earned his spurs in the Senate as a member of the Judicial Proceedings Committee.

Even today, the bills he sponsors have a decidedly legal slant. This year, he is sponsoring a whopping 31 bills, nearly half of which are legal in nature.

Past history tells much the same story. Among his legislative accomplishments are a measure adding protections for victims of spousal abuse, a bill raising the legal smoking limit in Maryland to 18 and a measure imposing stiffer fines on anyone convicted of using a minor in the manufacturing of drugs.

He also has been an advocate for lawyers and judges, co-sponsoring the comparative fault bill, pushing in 1994 to restore punitive damage awards to drunken driving victims and defending the rights of judges to extend their forced retirement age to 75.

Boozer acknowledged that the recent

ethical allegations levied against two colleagues have made most legislators think twice about voting or sponsoring certain bills that might benefit their private occupations.

Yet, he challenges anyone to find such improprieties in his past, even concerning the legislative office he currently maintains out of his law firm in Towson.

"It's a real concern for all of us," he said. "Every time something happens to somebody, it lowers the public's opinion of each and every one of us. But you can always take the rule" and excuse yourself from voting on issues.

Growing influence

Today, Boozer remains one of the Budget and Taxation Committee's top legislative minds.



State Sen. F. Vernon Boozer played a critical role in last year's debate on the income tax cut, helping to craft a compromise that won legislative support. This year, he hopes to do the same with a proposal to expand the tax cut by 5 percent.

A self-proclaimed fiscal conservative, he frequently has used his highly coveted position on the budget-crafting committee as a selling point in election campaigns, even though voters don't need much convincing.

Rarely has he been seriously challenged in a district that is becoming more conservative with each passing election.

Even his list of supporters seems somewhat out of character for a conservative Republican. But their support may be more a testament to his influence in the Assembly rather than his political philosophy.

Among his endorsers are: Clean Water Action, Maryland NARAL (National Abortion Rights Action League), the Teachers Association of Baltimore County and the Sierra Club.

At the time he entered the Senate in 1981, the Republicans there could have "caucused in a phone booth," Boozer jokes.

These days, the General Assembly's makeup tells a very different tale. In the 47-member Senate, Boozer presides over a 15-member Republican delegation, many of whom are in their first or second term.

"We've got some very good young guys around now," Boozer said. "I think we've made gains because we've run good candidates, and we've had the issues with us."

Accordingly, Boozer said he foresees only one more term in his legislative future.

"I might be getting close [to retirement] because I think I've got some good, young people behind me," he said. "I'd like to do it for one more term, and then, leave it to them."