



Master of Consensus

It is said that Maryland Speaker Mike Busch inundates his caucus with information and persuades them with intellectual brute force.

BY TOM STUCKEY, PHOTOS BY WILLIAM WYATT

Michael Erin Busch was chairman of the House Economic Matters Committee in 2002 and looking forward to four more years when it became clear on Election Night that the incumbent speaker, Casper Taylor, would lose his race. Busch and his aides began making calls that night to line up support for his bid to succeed Taylor, who had been a friend and mentor. They moved so quickly that they had the commitments needed to win the speaker's post before anyone else could mount a serious challenge. Busch was chosen by House Democrats without opposition.

Busch, 60, was elected to the House of Delegates in 1986 to represent a district that includes the Capitol. A high school teacher and coach, Busch jokes that his victory was based on votes from people he had taught or coached, or their relatives.

Busch's job running the House is made easier by the fact that Democrats outnumber Republicans 104 to 37. He has, for the most part, maintained cordial

relations with Republicans, although there are occasional dustups with some GOP members over issues such as taxes, gay rights and immigration. Busch and Democratic Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller maintain a publicly cordial working relationship despite differences over a few hot button-issues such as slot machines, which Miller favors and Busch opposes.

Busch, a graduate of Temple University, works for the Anne Arundel County Department of Recreation and Parks when he is not involved in legislative duties. He and his wife, Cindy, have two daughters, Erin and Megan, and live in Annapolis not far from the Capitol.

MIKE BUSCH'S DAY

7:47 A.M.

Busch begins his day, as he usually does, driving daughter Erin to school. When he drops her

off at her public middle school, she leans over, gives him a quick kiss on the cheek and says, "I love you," before jumping out of the car."

8:05 A.M.

Back at his modest shingled house, Busch waits a little impatiently as daughter Megan, a third grader, dashes out to the car. He drives a few blocks to her public elementary school and watches as she walks into the building. "This is the best part of the day," he remarks.

8:24 A.M.

Busch stops at a small deli for his usual morning sandwich—egg, cheese and tomato on a croissant. He settles in at a table inside with his sandwich, a cup of coffee and a newspaper. "Did you see him dip it in his coffee?" one of the regulars teases. Unfazed, Busch continues to dunk his sand-

wich as he chats with the owner and other customers. The breakfast break—19 minutes today—is a regular part of the speaker's morning routine during the nine months of the year that the legislature is not in session.

8:43 A.M.

Busch returns to the car, which he drives himself even though he has a state police officer at his disposal, and heads for his job, which he calls his real job, at the Department of Recreation and Parks. Like most members of Maryland's part-time legislature, Busch has a second job to help pay the bills.

9:02 A.M.

Busch joins a staff meeting at the agency where he has worked for 27 years; currently he is the assistant to the director.

9:42 A.M.

He slips out of the meeting for the short drive to the State House and the major item on his agenda for the day, a bill signing ceremony with two fellow Democrats—Governor Martin O'Malley and Senate President Miller at 10:00.



10:01 A.M.

Busch swings into his reserved parking place a minute late. (His staff, unable to contact him, is relieved that he has arrived) As Busch walks into the State House, a reporter grabs him, asking about a Republican lawmaker's complaint about a new



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Spanish language service planned by Maryland Public Television. Busch is probably the most accessible major public figure in Maryland and rarely fails to answer a question at length.

10:05 A.M.

Busch reaches the ceremonial room on the second floor of the State House for a bill signing that won't start for several more minutes. He is collared by Delegate Curt Anderson, who is collecting money to take about 300 boys and girls to Cooperstown, N.Y., for Cal Ripken's induction into



the Baseball Hall of Fame. When the bill signing ceremony starts, O'Malley offers Miller and Busch a chance to speak. Miller demurs. Busch talks briefly, praising the legislature for passing a state living wage law, the first of its kind in the nation. Busch, Miller and



the governor spend more than an hour signing 203 bills passed by the 2007 General Assembly.

11:43 A.M.

When the ceremony finally ends, Busch walks down a flight of stairs on the way to his office but stops when he sees a group of elementary students peering through the door into the House of



Delegates chamber. Busch invites them in, seats them in chairs normally used by members and gives an impromptu lecture on state government. "I always love to talk to the kids. I'm an old history teacher," he explains.

11:52 A.M.

Busch meets privately with Delegate Nancy King. After the meeting, Busch goes over his schedule, signs citations and letters, and talks to his staff about invitations to future events. Busch goes over emails that have been printed out by his staff. There is



a notebook computer on his desk, but he doesn't even turn it on during the almost four hours he will be in the office. Asked why he doesn't make more use of electronic devices, he says: "I have good staff. I call people on the phone." He is also wary about the potential use of the public information law to access electronic records that would open up his family to public scrutiny.

12:35 P.M.

Busch gives an interview to a reporter for his local newspaper, then meets with Steve Carr, community liaison with the State Highway Administration. Carr has come to talk about community outreach, but he is a local political activist, and the two men spend most of their time chatting about Annapolis city politics.

1:20 P.M.

Busch takes a brief break for lunch—tuna salad on lettuce with crackers and a Pepsi. But he's a Coke drinker, and he kids his staff about running out of his favorite drink.

1:35 P.M.

Busch begins a light afternoon schedule with a meeting arranged by Nick Manis, a lobbyist who played high school basketball for Busch. Manis brings in representatives from a computer-learning company based in Texas who are talking to Maryland schools about using their products. They don't ask for any favors, but spend about 15 minutes talking to Busch about their learning programs and how they can help improve student performance.

3:05 P.M.

Busch meets with William Dabbs, his doctor, who has asked for an appointment to exchange

ideas about problems facing health care providers. Health care is one of the speaker's favorite topics, and the two men spend about 20 minutes talking about what the state can do to improve the system and help doctors.

3:35 P.M.

Busch walks two blocks to a Senate office building where there is a small gym with exercise machines and treadmills. He



spends more than half an hour lifting weights while watching a poker tournament on TV.

4:20 P.M.

Busch leaves the gym for the walk back to his car and then the short drive home, where a state trooper will drive him to the final event of the day, a speech on global warming by former Vice President Al Gore at the University of Maryland at Baltimore County. Before the speech, Busch and his wife, Cindy, attend a reception and dinner for Gore given by university officials. 🏠

PROVIDE BALANCE



“The legislature is like a school and the speaker is the principal. You are responsible for everything that takes place.”

Speaker of the Maryland House of Delegates Michael Busch

ON ACHIEVING CONSENSUS:

“Consensus is my goal. I can’t force anybody to do anything. Everybody is elected. They can replace all of us in leadership at any time if they want to. My job is to provide the information and build consensus. My job as presiding officer, along with the governor and the Senate president, is to provide balance. You try to come to a consensus if you can.”

ON ACCESSIBILITY TO HIS MEMBERS:

“I hope they feel comfortable around me and that they believe I’m fair. They can walk into my office and talk to me at any time. No. 1, they deserve that. No. 2, that’s how you achieve consensus.”

ON DEALING WITH REPUBLICANS:

“I appreciate the role the minority caucus plays. They have to question the majority. If they make logical arguments in opposing us, it makes the members question what we do. The important thing is that they feel included in the process and in the committee process. It’s important to

have dialogue from both political parties.” Busch says that out of about 1,500 bills introduced each year in the house, “probably only 20 to 30 a year break down on party lines.” Busch said Republican bills get the same treatment in committee as bills by Democratic lawmakers. “I never tell a committee chairman, ‘Don’t vote on so and so’s bill.’”

ON HOW HE PERSUADED HOUSE DEMOCRATS TO VOTE FOR A MAJOR TAX PACKAGE:

“I began with meetings with core leadership, then expanded out from there to include vice chairs, whips, minor committee chairs, then to the entire Democratic caucus.” The tax program was Busch’s alternative to slot machine legislation supported by Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller and then-Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich as a way to pay for the school funding reform. Not only did Busch ask his caucus to support what would have been the largest tax increase in state history, he did it knowing that Senate leaders had already sent clear signals the bill would

die if it was sent to them by the House. “To get 75 people to vote for that, I had to make them believe that was the only way to pay for reform. Everybody knew slots were not the answer,” Busch said. House Majority Leader Kumar Barve said the tax bill exemplified Busch’s leadership style. “He overwhelms his caucus with information and persuades them with intellectual brute force.”

ON HIS MENTORS:

Busch considers Robert Pascal, a former Republican county executive, and former Democratic House Speaker Casper Taylor as the major influences on his career. Pascal encouraged him to enter politics, despite the difference in political parties. “I admired his accessibility and the way you always felt he identified with you. You could leave Bob Pascal’s office when he told you ‘No,’ and you still felt he understood you. Cas Taylor was probably the most gracious person I’ve ever known in public life. He was very good to me.”