

Slots vote could hinge on freshman lawmakers

Governor courts Dems as he pitches proposals for reducing the deficit

BY ALAN BRODY
STAFF WRITER

ANNAPOLIS — Like many of his freshman colleagues, Del. Jeff Waldstreicher was simply trying to figure out where the bathrooms were during his first legislative session.

Nine months after taking office, first-term lawmakers are being thrown into the lion's den as the legislature prepares to take up Gov. Martin O'Malley's plan to bridge a projected \$1.7 billion budget deficit.

The size of the newly inducted freshman class — 36 in the House and 12 in the Senate — could give first-time lawmakers a more pivotal role in the debate.



Waldstreicher
It's a big class, so votes matter

"I don't think anyone can consider us as a group to be backbenchers," said Waldstreicher (D-Dist. 18) of Kensington.

"There's just too many of us. It's a big freshman class, and our votes as a group matter critically to the outcome of the special session."

As O'Malley (D) works to build consensus, he's reaching See FRESHMAN, Page A-9. out to the class of 2007, who have never cast votes on legalized slot machines. The governor on Monday invited freshman Democrats to

Government House, where budget discussions were front and center.

"It's hard for people to imagine what they're going to be in for, the political pressure they're going to be under from both constituents and lobbyists," said Del. Tom Hucker, who previously spent time in Annapolis as executive director of Progressive Maryland.



Hucker

Under a lot of political pressure

The closed luncheon made headlines when O'Malley, in response to a question from Hucker, said he would consider backing a referendum on expanded gambling.

"He said then and he said the next day that he's open to anything that moves us toward consensus," said Hucker (D-Dist. 20) of Silver Spring.



King

Does O'Malley need GOP votes?

Several freshman Republicans not invited to Monday's lunch said they weren't miffed by the exclusion, but suggested inviting only the Democrats runs counter to O'Malley's goal of building consensus across party lines.

"I don't know if he feels that he doesn't need the freshman Republicans or if he [thinks he] has the votes with the freshman Democrats," said Del. James J. King (R-Dist. 33A) of Gambrills. "I don't feel slighted at all, but it's an indication to me that he feels he doesn't need our votes to get

things done."

It may be a miscalculation to exclude the GOP. O'Malley needs 71 votes in the House and 24 in the Senate to win support for his plan, and legalizing slots, one of the most divisive elements, may depend on GOP support.

"A first-term legislator's vote counts just as much ... as a fourth-term legislator's vote counts," said Donald C. Fry, a former Democratic state senator who is president and CEO of the Greater Baltimore Committee. "One vote is one vote. When you have to get to the critical numbers of 71 in the House and 24 in the Senate, each vote is equal and equally important."

Where are freshmen finding their cues?

The presiding officers steer the bus and have a lot of influence, but ultimately it comes down to what constituents want, said Del. John A. Olszewski Jr. (D-Dist. 6) of Dundalk, at 25 the legislature's youngest member. "We were elected by a constituency that has certain needs ... and if we feel like that community isn't served well, whether it's slots or something else, we're not going to put [our] constituency second."

It's important for rookie lawmakers to be independent, especially because they are usually considered low on the totem pole, Hucker said. "There's an unhelpful public perception that you run for office, you come to Annapolis and the veteran lawmakers tell you how to vote and twist your arm."

The freshman class is ready to tackle the deficit, Waldstreicher said.

"For most of the freshmen, we all have experience outside of the legislature in policy advocacy and social justice issues, so even though we're new to the legislature, we're not new to these issues ... of tax fairness, issues of protecting middle-class families."

