

O'Malley may be playing risky game

■ If he doesn't have his ducks in a row, a special session could hurt him

BY ALAN BRODY AND SEAN R. SEDAM STAFF WRITERS

ANNAPOLIS — With a special session possibly in the offing, the numbers 24 and 71 are in Gov. Martin O'Malley's crosshairs.

They represent the minimum number of votes needed in the Senate and House to approve his deficit-busting proposal, a delicately crafted combination of tax hikes, spending reductions and legalized slot machines.

The governor has spent the past several weeks outlining his plan to lawmakers, meeting with some individually, in an effort to forge consensus and ensure success in his biggest test to date.

But some legislators, owing to controversial elements of the plan, such as expanded gambling, have yet to declare O'Malley (D) victorious.

That has fueled speculation of what the governor can and will do to secure the votes he needs.

"It is a delicate balance, and one of the techniques used in negotiating is to expand the pie," said former delegate Adrienne A. Mandel, who spent 22 years in Annapolis as Montgomery County's chief lobbyist and as a lawmaker. "That can be framed in terms of 'If you give up a little here, I'll give you a little more there,' and that has always been an effective tool."

But that kind of horse trading can backfire, said former senator Ida G. Ruben, who served

in the House and Senate under five administrations.

"It's hard to please everyone," she said. "If you please one person, you make someone else angry."

O'Malley may find that ignoring Republicans is also a dangerous tactic, warned Jean W. Roesser, who spent two terms each in the House and Senate. "It's important not to just have the get-togethers with the majority party, because at some point they might need the minority."

One example is slots, which passed the House two years ago with the minimum number of votes and thanks largely to Republican support.

If Senate Republicans deliver on their promise to yank their support of slots during a special session, O'Malley will need to reach a middle ground with more Democrats.

"The real question in my mind is not how the governor can yoke people to his wagon, but can he change wagons?" said Del. Luiz R.S. Simmons (D-Dist. 17) of Rockville, an outspoken slots opponent with reservations about other pieces of O'Malley's plan.

Rumors were circulating this week that the administration was dangling money for a new District Courthouse in Rockville in order to sway Montgomery lawmakers.

Sen. Richard S. Madaleno Jr. said he heard the talk that Simmons' anti-slots stance could jeopardize the courthouse, which is in Simmons' district, but discounted it as "idle chat of the political class."

Madaleno (D-Dist. 18) of Kensington said it would be "foolish" to punish the rest of the Montgomery County delegation and the county's legal community "for the perceived sins of one legislator."

Such a threat wouldn't be enough to change Montgomery lawmakers' position anyway, he said.

Still, that strategy would hardly be new, said former senator Leo E. Green, who spent nearly three decades in Annapolis. "I think he's got to wrap some tax cuts around the tax increases and then he has to find some Christmas [presents] to folks that are on the fence."

House Minority Leader Anthony J. O'Donnell (R-Dist. 29C) of Lusby said such a move would be ill advised. "Horse trading for votes only costs taxpayers more hard-earned dol-



lars.”

Other bargaining chips that O’Malley could use include promises for a broader health care initiative, strong support for the “Green Fund” bill, expanding the sales tax to additional services and adjusting the income tax brackets to lessen the blow to high earners.

The governor also doesn’t want to have to reshape his entire proposal, said Donald C. Fry, a former state senator who is president and CEO of the **Greater Baltimore Committee**.

“The governor is going to have to determine which parts of his package have a general consensus as they have been currently proposed or would require just a minor tweaking,” he said. “The problem you have is there are 188 legislators, and each could develop their own plan as to how to address the problem. The challenge for the governor is trying to find one plan that a majority of the legislators can live with.”

One political scientist said everything centers on resolving the slots impasse.

“Once that issue is solved, then I think all the pieces on the board come together,” said Donald F. Norris, public policy department chairman at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. “They may not come together 100 percent the way that the governor has proposed it, but it will come together very substantially the way he has proposed it.”

O’Malley is taking a gamble by calling a special session if he doesn’t have the votes he needs, Norris said. “Either he’s got that consensus and we don’t know about it, or he’s moving forward without a consensus — and that’s a pretty gutsy and risky thing to do.”

