

Baltimore Business Journal - January 16, 2006

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General Assembly 2006

Prelude to battle

Election-year politics to dominate legislative session

Baltimore Business Journal - January 13, 2006 by [Heather Harlan](#)

Despite the start of the 2006 legislative session on Jan. 11, Gov. Robert Ehrlich spent a large chunk of his week in Baltimore -- instead of taking center stage in Annapolis.

On Monday, the state's highest elected leader used Randallstown as a backdrop to unveil his property tax cut plan.

On Tuesday, he made remarks at Port of Baltimore's 300th anniversary kickoff -- an event that was devoid of any city politicians.

And on Wednesday, the governor managed to find time to announce a technology and stem cell initiative at the University of Maryland campus in Baltimore City.

Ehrlich's actions and quick scene changes are uncharacteristic of past years' schedules, when the governor has stayed close to the State House as a new legislative session takes shape.

But this isn't just any year. It's an election year. With almost every seat up for grabs in November, Annapolis is not politics as usual. Elected officials -- from the governor to state senators -- are distracted by campaign issues and voter perception. The result could be a lot of miscues, bad acting and flaring tempers along the way.

"I think things will get done," said Paul S. Herrnson, director for the [Center for American Politics and Citizenship](#) at the University of Maryland, regarding the upcoming session. "But I think electoral politics will be very prevalent."

Before the curtain even rose on the session, Senate President Thomas V. "Mike" Miller Jr., D-Calvert and Prince George's, started throwing jabs at Ehrlich that very morning.

"We're dealing with government by press release," he said during a pre-taping of the Marc Steiner radio show on WYPR. "We read about the money he is putting in higher education in the newspaper."

Miller's comments went directly to Ehrlich's recent flurry of press conferences, highlighting how the governor hopes to spend the state's surplus -- a campaign strategy designed to take issues directly to voters before consulting with many legislators.

Miller, who said he meets with Ehrlich on a regular basis, told the Baltimore Business Journal this week that he expects a lot of "political rhetoric" to creep into this year's legislative session. "There's a job to get done, though," he said.

House Speaker Michael Busch, D-Anne Arundel, gave a similar prediction. "I think things will get done," he told the Business Journal. "I'm optimistic. There will be a lot of posturing and sniping. We're going to be fine."

Ehrlich was much more nonchalant. "It's kind of no different than any other session," the governor said of the partisan politics in Annapolis.

Frank DeFilippo, a political pundit and local radio commentator, said typical election year sessions are "pretty tame." But he speculated this General Assembly would not only be partisan, but also "acidic."

"The atmosphere is very toxic down there," said DeFilippo, once a press secretary for former Maryland Gov. Marvin Mandel.

Still, some experts, have differing views on how this atmosphere will affect the outcome, and just how many pieces of key legislation will get passed during the next 90 days.

Donald C. Fry, president of the [Greater Baltimore Committee](#) and a former state legislator, said the General Assembly is technically only responsible for passing a budget.

In addition to working through the budget process, he said the legislature will likely address eminent domain and health care issues. More controversial topics, including stem cell research, are likely to fade into the background during an election year, Fry said.

"Generally, I don't think you're going to see major policy changes," he said.

Herrnson said he expects politicians to introduce legislation that appears to be beneficial to voters.

And overall, he said, both parties will try to politicize issues, starting with the so-called [Wal-Mart bill](#).

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