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Former Aides to Miller Now Lobby Him

Working for Long-Serving Senate President Enhances Résumés for Many

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Sunday, April 20, 2008; C05

In Annapolis, it can pay to have worked for [Mike Miller](#).

No fewer than five members of the capital lobbying corps are former aides to the long-serving Senate president, including two perennial top earners and another who just successfully pushed for the repeal of Maryland's computer services tax.

The governor's top lobbyist in the legislature also once worked for Miller, as did the chief lobbyist for [Montgomery County](#). So, too, did two other members of the General Assembly and one of the state's top health-care officials.

His alumni club is testament to both the tutelage and longevity of Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr. (D-Calvert). But it is also a reflection of how Annapolis works.

In Maryland's capital, a noticeable number of senior legislative staff members parlay their work behind the scenes into higher-paying positions of influence. And Miller readily acknowledges that in the heat of a legislative battle, those ties can provide an advantage to his former aides and the clients they are paid to represent.

"They're my close personal friends," Miller, who has presided over the Senate for more than two decades, said in an interview. "They've never stopped working for me, and I've never stopped helping them. It means they have access to me always. They know not to abuse that friendship. They know there's a line they can't cross. But I've never turned any of them away."

Having access to Miller hardly guarantees passage of a bill. But lawmakers and lobbyists interviewed for this story suggest that relationships with legislative leaders can make a difference, particularly on lower-profile legislation that is of primary importance to a particular client.

For example, one high-ranking senator said a bill that extended a deadline for companies to comply with Maryland's upcoming ban on phosphates in dishwasher detergents passed in the recent session in large part because Procter & Gamble hired a former chief of staff of Miller's as a lobbyist. The bill's sponsor said that had nothing to do with its passage.

[Sean Dobson](#), executive director of Progressive Maryland, said public-interest groups such as his can be at a disadvantage compared with business interests trying to make their presence felt in Annapolis.

"There are a number of ways to try to influence top lawmakers," Dobson said. "Unfortunately, two of them -- campaign contributions and hiring a lawmaker's friends as your lobbyist -- both cost a lot of money."

The phenomenon is not unique to Miller or Annapolis.

On [Capitol Hill](#), it is common for legislative staffers to take higher-paying jobs as lobbyists after toiling for years at government wages.

In Annapolis, the campus of redbrick buildings that includes the 228-year-old State House is virtually a world unto itself. Senior staffers operate on a first-name basis with much of the 188-member General Assembly, and discussion of the Byzantine process by which a bill becomes a law is all but a second language.

"A lot of people never leave," said Donald Norris, chairman of the public policy department at the University of Maryland Baltimore County. "They become highly marketable, but within a narrow range of organizations."

[House Speaker Michael E. Busch \(D-Anne Arundel\)](#)

has lost only one aide thus far to the lobbying profession in the nearly six years since he ascended to his post. His former chief of staff, Tom Lewis, is now a lobbyist for [Johns Hopkins University](#).

Several erstwhile lawmakers, including former House speaker Casper R. Taylor Jr. (D-Allegany), who lost his reelection bid in 2002, are also now paid to influence their one-time colleagues.

Several aides from earlier in Miller's career have built lucrative lobbying practices.

John R. Stierhoff, who was his chief of staff when Miller became Senate president in 1987, reported \$781,902 in compensation for lobbying on behalf of a wide range of clients, including several large corporations, during the year ending in October.

Another former aide, Gerard E. Evans, reported \$631,000 during the same period. Evans served as a legislative assistant in the early 1980s, when Miller chaired the Senate [Judicial Proceedings Committee](#). The launch of his lobbying career coincided with Miller taking office as Senate president.

"In how you craft your message and present your message, you're bound to have a leg up with him," Evans said of his former boss. "But Mike is more than happy to tell you to go to hell, too."

The impact of hiring a former Miller aide to lobby a bill can be difficult to measure in some cases.

But several lawmakers pointed to the bill that extended the deadline for complying with Maryland's ban on phosphates in dishwasher detergents. The ban, set to take effect in 2010, had been pushed last year as an environmentally friendly measure that would help curb algae blooms in the ailing [Chesapeake Bay](#).

This year, Procter & Gamble hired Timothy Perry, who served as Miller's chief of staff until 2006, to help delay the effective date of the bill by six months. The legislation passed the Senate 25 to 22.

"I think the reason that bill passed is Tim Perry was the lobbyist for Procter & Gamble," said [Sen. Brian E. Frosh \(D-Montgomery\)](#), who sponsored the bill creating the ban and unsuccessfully fought the extension. "He's a very talented individual, but he also has close ties to Mike Miller. . . . It's very helpful to have the ear of the presiding officer."

Sen. Michael G. Lenett (D-Montgomery), who sponsored the extension bill at the request of the detergent industry, called Frosh's claim "absolutely ridiculous," saying that Frosh made several exaggerations during debate over the issue.

Lenett said Perry and others made a convincing case that it made sense to move Maryland's deadline so that it coincided with several other states enacting similar bans.

Perry declined to comment for this story. Miller credited Perry for working hard to pass the bill but said the same case could have been made by other diligent lobbyists.

Miller also noted that his former chief of staff got nowhere with him on another bill he was hired to push: repealing Maryland's death penalty. "I said, 'Tim, have you no shame?'" Miller recalled. "I'm not going to vote for repeal of the death penalty under any circumstance."

The group Perry represented was able to achieve a partial victory, however, with a bill calling for a study of capital punishment that is expected to last for the remainder of the year.

On some issues, former Miller aides wind up working at cross-purposes. A Senate committee hearing on a bill to repeal the state's computer services tax proved a case in point last session. It also served as an unannounced reunion of Miller staffers.

Joseph C. Bryce, who served as Miller's chief of staff in the mid-1990s and is now chief legislative officer for Gov. [Martin O'Malley](#) (D), sat at the witness table arguing for the tax's repeal.

Perched in the back of the room was Melanie Wenger, who stepped down as Miller's chief of staff in 2002 to become Montgomery County's chief lobbyist. She monitored the debate with a spreadsheet in hand that showed the disproportionate impact that a replacement tax, a surcharge on millionaires, would have on Montgomery.

Perry was present as well, representing a new computer services association that had hired him to help repeal the tax.

Three other former Miller aides who are now part of the Annapolis lobbying corps -- Stierhoff, [Josh White](#) and Hannah Powers -- were also in the audience that afternoon, representing clients with business before the Budget and Taxation Committee.

Miller's stable of former aides also includes two members of the legislature -- Sen. [James Brochin](#) (D-Baltimore County) and Del. Benjamin S. Barnes (D-Prince George's) -- and Stephen Ports, principal deputy director of the Maryland Health Services Cost

Review Commission, which sets rates for hospitals.

Wenger said that for those who have moved into lobbying, the transition is natural.

"It becomes your specialty: understanding the process and knowing the players well," she said. "That's what you have to capitalize on. . . . You're spending time developing a cadre of skills that, to be honest, are kind of useless somewhere else."

Miller, who is contemplating retirement after 2010, predicted that it would not be long before someone tries to lure away his current chief of staff, Victoria Gruber.

"I'm so afraid somebody's going to hire her," Miller said. "She's unbelievable. . . . Somebody's going to hire her for big, big bucks."

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