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From the Baltimore Sun

Fight for Assembly tightens

GOP hopes to pick up seats, while Democrats remain confident

By Michael Dresser
Sun reporter

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When Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. formally announced his bid for a second term in June, he said his re-election would be less than a success if it wasn't accompanied by significant Republican gains in a General Assembly that frequently thwarted his first-term wishes.

State Republicans set a goal of picking up five seats in the state Senate and 14 in the House of Delegates, which would be enough to prevent even a united front of Democrats from overriding gubernatorial vetoes without Republican support.

Through the fall, with Ehrlich lagging behind Mayor Martin O'Malley in most polls and President Bush's approval rating scraping bottom, that goal seemed far-fetched. Democrats began to dream that they could make inroads in districts Republicans considered safe.

But with the most recent poll conducted for The Sun showing that Ehrlich is closing the gap, Republican hopes are rising again.

Particularly encouraging for Republicans are Ehrlich's apparently widening margins in Anne Arundel and Baltimore counties, jurisdictions where the GOP thinks it can make significant gains. In earlier polls, Ehrlich's lead in those counties didn't come close to his 2002 margins over Kathleen Kennedy Townsend.

"I just think we're on the verge of a real two-party system," said House Minority Whip Anthony J. O'Donnell, a Calvert County Republican.

In some districts, the Ehrlich surge in the polls might be too late.

Keith Haller, president of Potomac Research, said the GOP quest for legislative gains was the "talk of Maryland" six months ago. But with Ehrlich fighting for his own survival, party resources have been concentrated on the governor's race, he said.

"That was part of the strategy, part of the game plan, but I think they decided to fight that one another day," said Haller, whose firm conducts polls for The Sun. "In reality, the troops have been moved to the big front. They've ceded that perimeter."

Democrats hold 32 of 47 seats in the state Senate -- losing one in September when Sen. John A. Giannetti Jr. switched to the GOP after a primary defeat -- and 98 of 141 in the House. With 29 Senate votes needed to override a gubernatorial veto or

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bring a filibuster to a close, a Republican pickup of four seats could have a powerful political impact by forcing more cross-party negotiations.

In Anne Arundel, Republicans are targeting the seats held by Sens. John C. Astle and James E. DeGrange Sr. as well as the seat being vacated by retiring Sen. Philip C. Jimeno. All are moderate to conservative Democrats who represent districts carried by Ehrlich in 2002, but only in Astle's district did the GOP field a well-known opponent.

In Baltimore County, the GOP is aiming to seize the seats held by Sens. James Brochin and Katherine A. Klausmeier. The Republicans are also making a run at the Democrat who represents Ehrlich's boyhood hometown of Arbutus, Sen. Edward J. Kasemeyer, whose district includes parts of Baltimore and Howard counties.

High on the GOP wish list is the Southern Maryland seat held by Democratic Sen. Roy P. Dyson, who is in a grudge match with St. Mary's County Commission President Thomas F. McKay in a race that could turn on family ties as much as on party affiliation.

Ehrlich has made it plain that there is little love lost between him and Dyson, who has opposed the governor on key votes despite a generally conservative record.

Democrats have not given up on any of those races, and they have their sights set on others.

Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller, who entered the final weeks with a large campaign fund that he can direct to Democratic races around the state, predicted that the GOP hopes of gains will be dashed.

"It's going to be a wash, or it's going to be a net gain for the Democrats," Miller said.

Democrats are counting on regaining Giannetti's seat. The senator, who represents Prince George's and Anne Arundel counties, is running as a Republican in the general election after being trounced by former Del. James C. Rosapepe in the Democratic primary. Ehrlich has supported Giannetti, but the strongly Democratic flavor of the district -- and the reluctance of some Republicans to embrace a defector -- makes his political survival a long shot.

Before Giannetti's defection, the party had long thought that its best chance for a pickup was in eastern Howard County, where two-term County Executive James N. Robey is battling Sen. Sandra B. Schrader, who squeaked into office in the Democratic-leaning district four years ago.

Encouraged by a seeming national Democratic tide, Democrats have also begun to wonder whether other seats held by very conservative Republicans might be in play, including:

- The district in Baltimore and Harford counties where former Maryland State Teachers Association President Patricia A. Foerster is challenging Republican Sen. Andrew P. Harris.
- The Frederick-Washington counties seat held by Sen. Alex X. Mooney. His Democratic opponent, Candy O. Greenway, has picked up the support of at least one of Mooney's defeated primary rivals.
- The southern Anne Arundel seat held by Sen. Janet Greenip, who is being challenged by Democrat Scott Hymes.

Hymes, Greenway and Foerster have benefited from mailings by the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee criticizing the incumbents.

In the House, Majority Leader Kumar P. Barve is predicting a Democratic gain of about four seats. In some cases, he said, the most formidable Republican candidates lost in the primaries.

He pointed to Harford County's District 35A, where conservative Republican Donna Stifler's primary victory over the more moderate Del. Joanne S. Parrott left bitter feelings that could create an opening for Democrat Craig H. DeRan.

Both parties have outside hopes of knocking off opposing leaders, the way the Republicans did in 2002 when redistricting helped them depose House Speaker Casper R. Taylor Jr.

The GOP hopes its three-member slate in District 30 can shut out House Speaker Michael E. Busch, Ehrlich's nemesis in the battle over slot machines. But unlike Taylor, who reacted slowly to the gathering Republican tide in Western Maryland, Busch has been running hard in his [Annapolis](#) district since the last election.

The Democrats' wish list includes the Southern Maryland district represented by O'Donnell, who supported some fee increases proposed by Ehrlich.

"They're calling me Tony the Tax Man," said O'Donnell. "Citizens are smarter than that. They're not going to let Mike Busch lie about my record."

Democrats are expected to retain their hold on the Prince George's County and Baltimore delegations unless Giannetti can win.

In Montgomery County, where one of 24 delegates is a Republican, the GOP faces an uphill battle despite recruiting some candidates with impressive credentials. Its best shot might be in District 15, where former economic development official Bill Asknazi is challenging Democratic Sen. Robert J. Garagiola, who ousted an incumbent Republican in a 2002 squeaker. Democrats regard Garagiola as one of their brightest young senators and think he will coast to re-election.

The GOP has another intriguing Senate candidate in Mike Ryman, the party's nominee for the open seat in District 19. He is a former FBI special agent who played a leading role in putting together public corruption cases in Philadelphia and New York.

Ryman is facing a better-financed Democrat in consumer-protection lawyer Mike Lenett, who defeated two incumbent delegates in a hard-fought primary in a district where Sen. John Kerry beat President Bush by a 2-1 margin in 2004.

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