

Delegate John Hurson

BY KELLY A. J. POWERS

Since 1991, John Hurson has represented District 18 of Montgomery County in the Maryland House of Delegates. A graduate of Georgetown Law School, he is a vice president for intergovernmental affairs for Ketchum Public Relations.



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During his tenure in Annapolis he has served as Chairman of the Administrative, Executive & Legal Committee and then as the Speaker's Democratic Majority Leader (1995 to 2001). Last year he was named Chairman of the Environmental Matters Committee.

Recently he sat with Port of Baltimore representatives to discuss one of the biggest issues for his committee in 2003: Dredging.

What are some of the critical issues that you anticipate your committee, the Environmental Matters Committee, will address in 2003?

Obviously important to the Port is the dredging issue. We are waiting for a report on the process of selecting long- and short-term solutions for dredged material management. Ultimately, there needs to be a 20-year management plan in place within two years. Clearly, we will be looking at what makes the Port successful and what contributes to its vitality. We know we have to continue to dredge and once we have a [20-year] plan in place, we will be able to say to the world we are serious about keeping the Port competitive.

Another important issue for the Committee will be access to health care. We have a health care system that is not working well so this will be a priority for the committee during the 2003 legislative session.

What are some of the biggest challenges facing a Committee Chairman?

As a committee chair, you must learn to balance many issues. For instance, over the long term we must learn how to share the resources of the Bay. The Bay is both a transportation mode for reaching the Port of Baltimore as well as a resource for fishing, boating and recreation. There is real concern among the environmental community, the seafood industry, etc., about how we deal with the dredging issue, but I am confident we can reach a consensus on a plan that balances both the needs of the environment and the needs of the Port of Baltimore. We have to protect the Chesapeake Bay, but we also need to keep the Port viable. We have two years to make a final decision on a dredging management plan, and this will give us the time we need to educate the public as to why dredging needs to be done, and how it will be done.

Dredging is a fact of life for the Port of Baltimore, however in the current economic climate (i.e., state budgetary shortfalls), do you believe it is possible for the Port to receive adequate funding to service the needs of the maritime industry?

Budgetary shortfalls are a huge issue. One of the messages I would emphasize is that in a time of limited resources, we need to find creative ways to fund important projects like dredging. We are looking at a budget that has no money in it for this particular purpose. Perhaps we might try a specialized tax for the Port, rather than trying to get funds out of the General Budget. User taxes are much more accepted by the public because they know what they are paying for, as with the gas tax.

What would people be buying when they pay a specialized tax for the Port? They would be buying jobs that keep one of Maryland's most important economic engines

On Dredging

running. We must continue to educate people about the Port and the economic benefits that it generates for the State.

In 2001, the Environmental Matters Committee unanimously supported legislation that established a better process for managing dredged material. Each year the navigational channels serving the Port require maintenance dredging of about 4 to 5 million cubic yards of material. How can we balance the dredging needs of the Port with sound environmental practices?

Whatever we decide on the dredging issue, we have to be informed by science. There must also be a level of trust and confidence in what the science tells us. The debate on Site 104 showed us how important it is to have a sound scientific basis for decision-making. That said, we as a community must reach a consensus on the best options for managing dredged materials. We have no other choice. The Port is too important, and the environmental protection of the Bay is important, too.

The Poplar Island Environmental Restoration Project stands as a national model for managing dredged material disposal in a way that benefits the environment. Do you think that projects like it are helping to change people's minds about dredging?

Oh, yes. I think people see Poplar Island as solving two problems with one approach. One, it is restoring an island that is important not only for supporting habitat but for preventing erosion in other areas of the Bay. At the same time, we are keeping the channels to the Port open. People recognize the value a project like this has, but it is also a very expensive way to manage dredged material disposal. If we can continue to find the resources for more projects like Poplar Island, we will have greater success in showing how the needs of the environment and the Port can be kept in balance. I do not think we will be able to afford that level of solution on a large scale, and certainly

not in time for the decisions we have to make by 2004.

With the Port geographically located in the Baltimore metropolitan area, do residents of Montgomery County have a sense of its economic impact on the State?

I do not think my constituency understands the urgency of dealing with dredging and what impact this has on shipping and the rest of the State. When the dredging report comes out, I will recommend that public hearings be held all over the state, including Montgomery County, and especially in places where there was a lot of community opposition to the Site 104 solution [open water placement]. You have to get out there. You have to create a sense of urgency. It would also help if the message came from someone not associated with the Maryland Port Administration, but rather from the private sector. Someone who could talk about the real economic issues related to dredging and the serious consequences if we cannot continue to dredge the channels.

Our general assembly will have experienced an almost 50% turnover in representation in 2003. What recommendations can you offer the Port community as we look to educate new members and garner support for Port-related initiatives?

I will insist to the Speaker that new members of the legislature and this committee be given an opportunity to tour Poplar Island and the Port so they can get a true sense of what has to happen in terms of dredging and what options we have for managing this issue. At the same time, the port community should reach out to the new members and make sure they get their points across just as the environmental community does. We need to hear from both sides of the issue. But you have to not only educate the members, but their constituencies as well. Until I saw the Port and Poplar Island for myself, I never really understood the dredging issue or the tremendous economic impact the Port has on Maryland. You cannot help but be impressed once you actually see the Port in person. I look forward to bringing my Committee members to the Port next year. ♪