

Legislature's environmental advocate tours site of disputed land deal

BY ALAN BRODY
STAFF WRITER

State Sen. Brian E. Frosh (D-Montgomery), one of the legislature's leading environmental advocates, toured an environmentally sensitive 836-acre tract in St. Mary's last week that the Ehrlich administration had offered to sell to a wealthy private developer last year.

The proposed sale touched off waves of criticism from Democratic legislators about the state's land transaction procedures. "It's very useful to see it firsthand," said Frosh of the Salem Tract on Indian Bridge



Frosh

Road that the state proposed to sell to Baltimore in vestor J. Willard J. Hackerman after the state purchased it in 2003. "The state should not be selling off parkland," Hackerman, who stood to receive approximately \$7 million in tax breaks in exchange for donating about 200 acres to St. Mary's for schools, terminated the deal when it was learned that he planned to build houses

on portions of the property. Sen. Roy Dyson accompanied Frosh to the rural forestland, located near Great Mills and accessible only on foot or all-terrain vehicle. "The last thing we want to do is sell off that" land, said Dyson (D-St. Mary's, Calvert, Charles). "We worked very hard over many generations to protect it."

The abhorred land deal prompted the General Assembly to pass a bill — principally sponsored by Frosh and Dyson — that called for a constitutional amendment mandating legislative oversight of land transactions. That amendment, which Dyson said will "get an enormous amount of support," will appear on the ballot next year. Both Frosh and Dyson believe Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. (R) will endorse the amendment prior to Election Day.

"I think he realizes how misguided this whole thing was," said Dyson, noting the negative reaction of St. Mary's residents to the proposed land sale. "Even though the administration opposed it all the way through, when it finally made its way to the Senate floor, the [Republican] opposition collapsed ... because they knew their position was untenable,"

we have to be at great pains to protect what we do have. It's difficult and so expensive to land aside for development to take land that we've already protected and put that on auction block."

Frosh later spoke at Maryland's College's Center for Study of Democracy, touch on juvenile justice reform, environmental initiatives, medical malpractice and the legislative investigation into state hit and firing practices under Robert L. Ehrlich, Jr. (R).

*E-mail Alan Brody
abrody@sonmdnews.com.*

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