

Sen. Paul S. Sarbanes, the studious liberal who became Maryland's longest-serving senator and who acted as quiet counsel to Democratic leaders through times of impeachment and scandal, announced yesterday that he will not run for reelection when his fifth term ends in January 2007.

"It was just the right time. We think we've served well and long and honorably," Sarbanes said in a surprise news conference overlooking Baltimore's Inner Harbor. "It was not my ambition to stay there until they carried me out."

In three decades in the Senate, Sarbanes, 72, earned a reputation for working behind the scenes on complex legislative puzzles, producing most notably a far-reaching 2002 law that brought more oversight to the corporate world after the Enron Corp. collapse.

In Maryland, his departure marks the political passing of a generation and cracks open a logjam of younger Democrats eager to succeed him in a state that will hold its first open Senate race in 20 years.

Within hours, a half-dozen politicians jockeyed for position while straining to defer attention to the senator. They included Kweisi Mfume, a former congressman and NAACP president; at least five House Democrats -- Benjamin L. Cardin, Elijah E. Cummings, Chris Van Hollen, C.A. Dutch Ruppersberger and Albert R. Wynn; and Prince George's County State's Attorney Glenn F. Ivey. Among Republicans, speculation focused on Lt. Gov. Michael S. Steele and state Sen. E.J. Pipkin (Queen Anne's), as Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. is preparing to seek reelection.

Sarbanes's announcement unofficially launched a wide-open season in Maryland politics, with both his seat and the governor's in contention in 2006. Democrats are bracing for an especially bruising gubernatorial primary between Baltimore Mayor Martin O'Malley and Montgomery County Executive Douglas M. Duncan. Both said yesterday that their focus remains on Ehrlich, even as Sarbanes's departure creates another option.

"I will not seek his seat," O'Malley, who leads Duncan in early polls, said in a statement. "We are laying the groundwork to run for governor."

Duncan said: "The whole world's looking at it, but I'm not one of them. I'm focused on running for governor."

Some prominent Democrats suggested, however, that there will be pressure for one of them to run for the U.S. Senate. Maryland Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr. (D-Calvert) said Democrats could then unify around one candidate for governor: "It will become apparent to one of them who is the more popular person."

Ehrlich, asked if he would seek the Senate post, replied, "I love being governor." He did not rule out the possibility that Steele, the running mate whom he has touted as his would-be successor in 2010, would consider the race.

"The fact that his success would lead to speculation doesn't surprise me," Ehrlich said, acknowledging the short bench of GOP leaders and Democrats' long grip on power and 2-to-1 voter registration edge in Maryland. Asked what would happen if national Republicans urge a bid by Steele, Ehrlich said, "We'll talk about it in any event."

State GOP Chairman John M. Kane said a run by Steele was not likely. "He wants to run for governor in 2010," Kane said.

In Maryland, analysts predicted the beginning of a changing of the guard in state politics -- both in age and geography. Both U.S. Senate seats have been held by Baltimore politicians since 1987; and the senators, as well as the state's comptroller and the attorney general, are all older than 65.

"The political center of gravity in Maryland has shifted away from the city to the Washington suburbs and the Baltimore suburbs," said Matthew Crenson, a political scientist at Johns Hopkins University.

"It opens the door for some new voices to step forward," said Baltimore County Executive James T. Smith Jr. (D). "I would just say, let the speculation begin."

In Washington, independent analysts and Senate Republicans said Sarbanes's retirement makes a solid Democratic seat far more competitive, although Maryland gave 56 percent of its presidential vote last year to Democratic nominee Sen. John F. Kerry (Mass.).

Sarbanes's announcement -- which aides had planned for a week -- brought a flood of tributes to his decency, intellect, integrity and legacy from Ehrlich, Miller, Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski (D) and Maryland House Speaker Michael E. Busch (D-Anne Arundel).

"He ranks among 'the best and the brightest,' " said House Minority Whip Steny H. Hoyer (D-Md.), borrowing a phrase from John F. Kennedy, whose presidency inspired both men to run for office.

"Without question, Paul Sarbanes is an intellectual giant in the Senate," said Hoyer, the only Democratic congressman in the state not considering a bid for Sarbanes's seat.

Sarbanes said he had made no decisions but would make plans with his wife of 44 years, Christine, explore "teaching, writing and lecturing," and spend the next 22 months opposing "the tragic and misguided policies of this administration."

Sarbanes, a Salisbury native, counted the 2002 Sarbanes-Oxley Act, which sets stricter standards for the accounting industry, among his major accomplishments. He chaired the Senate Banking and Housing and Urban Development Committee from June 2001 to January 2003.

A vocal critic of Republican economic and monetary policies that he said harmed the poor, Sarbanes also became a trusted behind-the-scenes adviser to a series of Senate Democratic leaders. As a member of the House Judiciary Committee in 1974, he introduced the first article of impeachment against President Richard M. Nixon.

He served in the Maryland House of Delegates from 1967 to 1971 and the U.S. House of

Representatives from Baltimore from 1971 until he entered the Senate in 1977.

Sarbanes, a New Deal Democrat, never owned a stock or bond until he invested recently in a retirement mutual fund. He is one of the least wealthy senators, reporting only the house he and his wife have lived in for decades and pension and personal banking accounts.

Sarbanes spent a quiet career that sometimes led to grumbling among Democrats who called him "the stealth senator," doubting his ambition and energy.

"They say 'stealth senator,' and of course I just point out one of the most powerful weapons we have in our military arsenal is the stealth bomber," Sarbanes said yesterday.

Still, Sarbanes acknowledged he would be 74 at the end of his term and had thought about the implications of another six-year commitment. He also deplored a political culture that would have required him to spend the next two years raising money, implicitly acknowledging pressure from state Democrats to leave time for would-be successors to raise upwards of \$10 million in the next 20 months.

There have also been questions about the senator's health. He suffered complications in 2003 from an allergic reaction to medical dye injected before otherwise successful surgery to remove a benign tumor from his salivary gland. Sarbanes yesterday dismissed such talk, saying his health was fine. He has three children and six grandchildren.

Staff writers Matthew Mosk, Mike Allen and Charles Babington contributed to this report.