

CHARLOTTE HALL -- Steny H. Hoyer understands completely the political calculus that has Maryland Democrats yearning for him.

It goes like this: The experienced, silver-haired congressman from a red county decides to run for governor as a rare Democrat conservative enough to run up huge vote totals in rural Southern Maryland while his social liberalism could energize the base in traditional Democratic strongholds.

Some Democrats see Hoyer (D-Dist. 5) of Mechanicsville as an ideal candidate for governor. He has decades of elected service to Prince George's County and Southern Maryland, a hawkish, pro-military voting record in Congress, access to bundles of campaign cash nationwide and long-standing bonds to core Democratic constituencies of African Americans, environmentalists and organized labor.

But all those attributes are swept away by Hoyer, 65, as flattery, and serve as a precursor to what the congressman says is his final answer:

"I'm not running for governor."

"Steny's world is being a legislator," said former state senator J. Frank Raley, a Democrat from St. Mary's County and one of Hoyer's closest allies. "He is extraordinarily good at it, and he would never leave it."

Administration, Raley says, "would bore him."

Plowing through the breakfast special at a favorite Southern Maryland diner last Friday, Hoyer laughed off the speculation. He has heard all the rumors and been asked by his allies if they are true, and the idea has even bounced around his brain a time or two.

Despite all that, Hoyer vowed that he will run for re-election to Congress in 2006.

"If I wanted to run for governor, I could make a good case why I would be a good candidate," Hoyer said before quickly stressing, "I want to make this very clear. I'm not running for governor now, and I'm not running in the future."

That statement, however, does not mean that Hoyer will not be involved for the next two years as the Maryland Democratic Party readies its campaign against Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr., the first Republican chief executive in a generation.

Hoyer is poised to be a major behind-the-scenes presence, developing the party's message, choosing candidates and trying to find a way to avoid what promises to be a divisive and expensive gubernatorial primary between Baltimore Mayor Martin O'Malley and Montgomery County Executive Douglas M. Duncan.

"If Hoyer can broker someone out of the primary race, he'd be achieving the single most important task on the path to unseating Ehrlich," said Thomas Schaller, a political science professor at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County who is active in state and national Democratic Party politics. "If there is a Democratic primary in 2006, that advantages Ehrlich to a great degree."

Hoyer talks freely about Ehrlich's vulnerabilities, and about his own optimism that the Democrats will be united. Thoughts of Duncan and O'Malley crossing swords make him cringe, he said.

Short-circuiting a bruising primary will be a tough -- if not impossible -- task. Both Duncan and O'Malley said in interviews Wednesday that they are moving forward with their plans.

"Contested elections are always good," Duncan said. "They are better for the people and better for the candidates."

"I certainly don't fear a contested primary," O'Malley said. "I think Steny Hoyer will make sure it's

not a divisive primary."

Hoyer has a proven track record in helping Democrats avoid minefields. Late last year, he pulled the necessary strings to help ensure that Terry L. Lierman, a wealthy Montgomery County businessman, was unopposed for state party chairman. He also weighed in on behalf of Edith Patterson, who became the first African-American commissioner in Charles County history earlier this month.

His involvement has not been without failure, however, especially his high-profile part in the failed gubernatorial campaign of former Lt. Gov. Kathleen Kennedy Townsend (D), who lost to Ehrlich.

Maryland Republican Party Chairman John M. Kane said the Democratic Party would not be trying to avoid a Duncan-O'Malley showdown next year if Hoyer and other top Democrats had not cleared the decks for Townsend in 2002.

"Two years ago, they only postponed the inevitable," Kane said.

Hoyer also said his call to avoid a primary is not a veiled plea for the retirement of 73-year-old U.S. Sen. Paul S. Sarbanes (D), whose term expires in 2006. Hoyer said he has encouraged Sarbanes to run for a fifth term even as some Democrats hope the veteran Baltimore political icon will step aside to clear the way for one of the two gubernatorial aspirants to run for the Senate.

Some Democrats also worry that if the party re-nominates Sarbanes (who will be 75 at election time), Comptroller William Donald Schaefer (who will be 85) and Attorney General J. Joseph Curran Jr. (who will be 75), it could be in trouble with women and minority voters.

Hoyer acknowledged that the party needs a diverse statewide ticket in 2006, but would not specify any particular changes.

He also said the party will need to appeal to rural and suburban voters, who polls have shown are trending toward Ehrlich.

"The Democratic Party has to stop falling off the left side of the table," said Del. Murray D. Levy (D-Dist. 28) of La Plata, a former president of the Charles County commissioners who has worked with Hoyer for more than a decade. "Steny Hoyer is a model of where we need to be as a party. He is a centrist and can communicate to both sides of the aisle."