

## ***O'Malley offers few clues on budget as Miller calls for gas tax increase***

by Alan Brody | Staff Writer

ANNAPOLIS — Top Maryland Democrats on Tuesday forecast a difficult 90-day legislative session in dealing with a \$1.6 billion budget shortfall and a \$33 billion long-term pension deficit, but vowed to make necessary decisions to ensure the state's fiscal health.

"This session, we're going to put the state back on sound fiscal footing and we're going to continue to make Maryland one of the best states in the union," Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr. said during an annual pre-session luncheon at The Westin Annapolis.

In past years, the luncheon has served as a pep rally to energize activists and elected officials, and to skewer Republicans. This year's event featured less partisan rhetoric, although several Democrats took shots at U.S. Rep. Andrew P. Harris (R-Dist. 1) of Cockeysville for inquiring about the congressional health plan and for missing his first vote last week.

But the dominant theme of the luncheon was closing the state's deficit.

"We not only have to cut, but we also have to protect the very things that allow us to give our children that better quality of life," said Gov. Martin O'Malley (D). "We have to invest in the things that allow our children to have a better quality of life."

Speaking with reporters after the luncheon, O'Malley gave no new details about his spending plan, but reiterated that it will not include new or higher taxes. He dodged a question about whether he would approve any tax increases sent to him from the General Assembly.

There will have to be a combination of spending cuts and new revenues to eliminate the shortfall, said Miller (D-Dist. 27) of Chesapeake Beach. He called on legislators to increase the gas tax to fund much-needed road and transit projects, though did not specify by how much it should increase. He also compared the budget pain to consuming less-than-desirable poultry.

"We're going to be eating gizzards and livers and chicken necks," he said.

Several speakers also mentioned a need to tone down partisanship, which hinders cooperation across party lines.

"We do know that we have a problem with civility and public discourse, which is coarsening the debate and undermining [efforts] to create consensus," said U.S. House Minority Leader Steny H. Hoyer (D-Dist. 5) of Mechanicsville, who alluded to the attack on U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords (D-Ariz.) and others Saturday in Tucson, Ariz., which left five dead and 18 injured.

"There's a lot of separation in this world, there's a lot of disconnection," O'Malley said. "There's a digital divide, there are achievement gaps, there are things that separate us and I really think our most important job right now is the important work of reconnecting with one another."