

Peter F. O'Malley III, a Prince George's County lawyer and Democratic Party power broker who served as consigliere to real estate and sports mogul Abe Pollin and was also a force in local education, health care and sports, died May 28 at a hospital in Rehoboth Beach, Del., after a heart attack. He was 72.

Mr. O'Malley, who came from a blue-collar Massachusetts background, completed Georgetown law school at night while working as a Capitol Hill police officer. In the 1970s, he began building one of the most influential corporate law practices in Maryland — a business that grew in tandem with his emergence as a key political strategist in Prince George's.

Working with his friend Steny H. Hoyer, then a rising presence in the Maryland Senate, Mr. O'Malley saw room for a vibrant, development-minded Democratic political organization that could replace the historically corrupt "boss" system as Prince George's was transitioning from a backwater into a suburban bedroom community.

Often described as hard-driving but thin-skinned and intense but soft-spoken, Mr. O'Malley excelled at backroom strategy and enforcing party discipline. Hoyer, now the U.S. House minority whip, was more the public face of the organization.

Their Democratic operation — which controlled nearly every political office in Prince George's from county executive to registrar of wills, and even some judicial appointments — won enormous clout in the Maryland State House.

In an interview, Hoyer said Mr. O'Malley was "an extraordinarily focused, disciplined planner in business and in politics. Pete was one of the best organizers and implementers of plans I've ever seen."

George H. Callcott, a retired University of Maryland professor who specialized in Maryland

history, said Mr. O'Malley "kept the county delegation together" in a way rivaled only by Baltimore City in its authority at the State House.

Mr. O'Malley "was thinking in terms of county coherence and well-being," he said. "He was in the position of being a political boss, but it was a little bit different. He enjoyed the authority but was dedicated to the development of the county."

Mr. O'Malley's law firm, whose clients included Giant Food and Baltimore Gas and Electric, became the nexus between county government and almost every major developer and interest group hoping to sway decision makers. He served as president of the Greater Washington Board of Trade and spoke admiringly about the benefits of free enterprise.

"Profit makes the world go round," he once told The Washington Post. "It's the underpinning of everything."

Perhaps his most notable client was Pollin, for whom Mr. O'Malley cleared the way to build Capital Centre in Landover — against the wishes of environmentalists and others who said the sports arena deal was arranged without sufficient public scrutiny.

When it opened in 1973, Capital Centre was widely regarded as a cultural boon to the county — a major venue to host professional sports teams and high-profile entertainers, from the Beach Boys to the Grand Ole Opry.

Mr. O'Malley remained one of Pollin's closest advisers and, in the 1990s, served as the developer's main negotiator with the D.C. government over the proposed MCI Center sports arena (now Verizon Center). He instructed the city what terms were acceptable to Pollin, who was willing to move his sports teams to downtown.

For a period, Mr. O'Malley was president of the Pollin-owned Washington Capitals hockey team. More enduringly, he ensconced himself in the region's civic and corporate corridors, often serving as a bridge between Prince George's and the larger metropolitan business community. He sat on boards as diverse as the utility company Pepco, the influential Federal City Council,

the Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer Foundation, and the Capital Area Food Bank.

Mr. O'Malley gravitated away from visible politicking by the late 1970s. With business and political interests that often appeared to intersect, he said he disliked being a target of criticism that he was running a machine that resembled the old boss system.

"My ability to become a positive force becomes limited because your motives are then questioned at every turn," he told *The Post* in 1977. "I don't want to be [perceived] as a sinister force. And if I can't overcome that, then I have to get out of the business of politics."

Peter Francis O'Malley III was born March 11, 1939, to a working-class Italian-Irish family in Clinton, Mass. His father was a postal worker, and his mother bagged groceries at a supermarket. He was not related to Maryland Gov. Martin O'Malley.

In 1958, he married his high school girlfriend, Janice Karol. Besides his wife, survivors include five children, Peter F. O'Malley IV of Annapolis, Kathy Rogers of Clarksville, Susan O'Malley of Sullivan's Island, S.C., who was a top executive in the Pollin sports operation, Mary Lunden of Ashton and Jennifer O'Malley of San Francisco; a sister; and nine grandchildren.

In 1960, Mr. O'Malley received a bachelor's degree from what is now Mount St. Mary's University in Emmitsburg. While attending law school at Georgetown, he supported his family by working as a police officer and elevator operator on Capitol Hill.

Energized by the Kennedy White House, Mr. O'Malley entered Maryland politics in 1962 and proved himself an industrious campaigner. His political contacts brought him a job with a zoning law firm soon after his graduation from Georgetown in 1965. The next year, he worked actively to elect his friend Hoyer to the state Senate.

In an interview with *The Post* in 1977, Mr. O'Malley said he and Hoyer were both "activist, opportunistic, ambitious" and gradually formed a political ideology focused on the county's growth as a mass-transit hub and curbing the excesses and bickering of the fractured Democratic Party. They earned the nickname "Diaper Dems" for their youth and energy, and

many of their chosen candidates won elections.

To consolidate their growing authority, they hosted a "breakfast club" of political insiders that largely decided the candidates best suited to local office and what issues they would pursue in Annapolis.

Mr. O'Malley's assertive style was not always welcomed. In the late 1980s as chairman of the Board of Regents of what is now the University System of Maryland, he provoked political battles and academic turf wars when he tried to move the law school in Baltimore to Prince George's. This led to several high-profile resignations from the university system. Ultimately, it led to his own.

A few years later, Mr. O'Malley emerged a public hero when he was tapped to help restructure and revive the financially troubled Blue Cross-Blue Shield of the National Capital Area.

The insurance giant was reeling from a series of financial and management problems, including reports of lavish spending by top officials, when Mr. O'Malley was asked in 1992 to serve as board chairman and reorganize the institution, which had more than 1 million subscribers and thousands of employees.

Within a year, he helped secure a \$60 million infusion of cash, in large part through a consortium of other Blue Cross plans.

"Mission accomplished," he said to much applause at a news conference attended by then-D.C. Mayor Sharon Pratt.

In recent years, Mr. O'Malley divided his time between Rehoboth Beach and West Palm Beach, Fla. He was known for comparatively restrained tastes, given his wealth. A rare concession to status was a green Jaguar. A red one, he decided, was too flashy.

