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Politicians, lobbyists and residents join to celebrate summer, seafood and suds

by Janel Davis and Sean R. Sedam | Staff Writers; Gazette Newspapers

CRISFIELD - The weather cooperated. The crabs didn't disappoint. The candidates were on their best behavior.

Almost 6,000 people made the pilgrimage to Somers Cove Marina for Wednesday's annual J. Millard Tawes Crab and Clam Bake. Among the attendees were familiar faces such as lobbyist Bruce Bereano, Marvin Mandel and Eastern Shore lawmaker J. Lowell Stoltzfus.

"This is the premiere political event in Maryland," said Stoltzfus, whose attendance at the event exceeds his 19 years in the state legislature. "Over the years, Tawes hasn't changed a whole lot; just the players change. Whoever is running for office comes to Tawes."

And come they did.

With this year being an off year for statewide elections, candidates for the 1st Congressional District had the audience all to themselves.

Republican Andy Harris and Democrat Frank Kratovil were out in full force, complete with entourages of yellow-and-blue-dressed aides and supporters. For extra credit, Kratovil put his sons to work as sticker-pushers - the four pint-sized replicas of their father asked from below, "Wanna sticker?"

Between slurps of crab and swallows of cold beer, festival-goers listened - or not - to the hard sell from each side.

By the end of the day, the Crisfield Chamber of Commerce had sold 5,800 tickets and, at \$40 a pop, collected about \$232,000 for its programs and town improvements.

"This is about what we did last year," said Valerie Howard, executive director of the Crisfield chamber. "We are still happy with this because of the economy."

Folks consumed 46,000 clams, devoured 350 bushels of crabs, chowed down on 800 pounds of fish and nibbled 725 dozen ears of corn.

And best of all, the crabs and clams were local, provided by companies all along the Eastern Shore, Howard said.

"The clambake is the seafood capital of the world," Crisfield native Sammy Insley Jr. said. "The area has changed, property taxes are up, which is hard on seniors ... but the clambake lets people forget about all that for at least one day."

Presidential politics

Largely lost in the hubbub of the District 1 race was the presidential election.

Harris and Kratovil supporters also sported John McCain and Barack Obama stickers, but that was about it.

Lobbyist and former Baltimore County delegate Don Murphy called Tawes the calm before the storm that follows the national conventions later this summer.

But the storm had already made it to the Democratic tent in the form of Jim Ireton, president of the Wicomico County Democratic Club. Talking almost nonstop, without even coming up for air, Ireton's excitement was uncontrollable.

"This is the first time in my life that I will have to order buses to get people to the polls," he said about Obama's chances of Ba-rocking the Vote. "This is a great time to be involved in politics."

Indeed it is, Del. Jolene Ivey said during her walk around the marina with Del. Rudy Cane.

"“You're an Obama delegate?" Cane asked.

"“I sure am," she said. "“And I'm not one of the ones who had to switch over."

Ivey was excited about attending the Democratic convention in Denver in August.

"“It's my first one. Before I stayed home because Glenn [her husband, the Prince George's County state's attorney] would go," she said. "“This year he's keeping the kids."

And just when you thought ...

Martin O'Malley was a no-show, as was Lt. Gov. Anthony G. Brown. It seemed the event would end without a visit from a statewide officeholder, but then Comptroller Peter V.R. Franchot arrived less than two hours before the finale.

Franchot, delayed by the day's Board of Public Works meeting, pressed the flesh and posed for photos with Deputy Comptroller Len Foxwell, returning home to roost.

As the crowds began to clear out, Franchot somehow made his rounds to every reporter at the festival and even got his mug in several photos.

"“The buzz here is about corn on the cob, crabs and cold beer," he quipped to reporters. "“There is no place I'd rather be."

Franchot had petitioned to move the BPW meeting to Crisfield this year, but a state bond sale foiled his plans. Next year, he said, the meeting moves to Crisfield.

Making time with Mandel

If Maryland's 61st governor - O'Malley - was absent, Governor No. 56 was on the case.

Marvin Mandel represented the office held by the crab and clambake's namesake, No. 54 - J. Millard Tawes.

As Tawes' ranking statesman, the 88-year-old Mandel was the life of the party.

Politicians and locals alike surrounded the diminutive leader for handshakes and photos.

"A lot of people from around the state were involved in getting this started. And the tradition has continued ever since. [It's] the same time and the same people are still here," Mandel said before retreating to a quiet tent to eat. "... And you make friends. And that's the important thing."

Friends in politics?

"There's always a place for friendship," he replied.

See and be seen

Tawes gives lawmakers a midsummer chance for access and perspective, said Del. Johnny Olszewski, who made the three-hour trip from Dundalk dressed in a heat-seeking black shirt.

"It's a good place to see and to talk with decision makers, influence makers, public opinion shapers," Olszewski said.

It's also an opportunity for officials representing the Western Shore to visit a part of the state they don't always get to see.

"We've got our own districts, the constituents that we are responsible for. But ultimately, at the end of the day we're also responsible for the entire state of Maryland," he said.

Later on, Stoltzfus and Del. Page Elmore were sitting under a tent going over the list of lawmakers who showed up for

the fun: Del. Wendell Beitzel, Sen. Tom Middleton, Sen. Allan Kittleman, Del. Rudy Cane, Del. Norm Conway, Sen. Nancy Jacobs, Del. Jeanne Haddaway-Riccio, Del. Ann Marie Doory ... "and that young Democratic delegate from Baltimore County, starts with an O ...," asked Elmore, holding a fat cigar.

Stoltzfus stepped in: "Johnny Olszewski."

Sign language

On the way into Crisfield, drivers were inundated with numerous Kratovil and Harris signs lining both sides of highways 50 and 13.

For a while, Kratovil led the way with a number of signs placed along the LEFT side of the road. Miles into the stretch, Harris countered with a rapid succession of signs on the RIGHT side of the road. Before hitting highway 413 -less than 10 miles from the marina - the unofficial count was Harris 13, Kratovil 7.

Then came the two.

"Like O'Malley? You'll love Kratovil" read one large sign. Followed by, "O'Malley and Kratovil go together like tax and spend."

What gives?

"We're going to get blamed for those," said Chris Meekins, Harris's campaign manager. "It's not us. We didn't do it. It wasn't our campaign. If we did, it would've had had one of our 'Paid For's on it. ... Driving by at 45 mph, you can't see the little 10-point authority line on the bottom of it, I guess. ... It's interesting that private citizens have the same opinion of the governor."

Said Harris about the signs: "Look, my opponent said publicly he wants to go to Washington to be an ally of Martin O'Malley. Obviously, the word is out."

Beer bust

Judging from the crowd dancing to party tunes in a tent at the back of the festival site, Dick Carey might have been the most important person in Crisfield.

The owner of Carey Distributors in Salisbury delivered 140 kegs of beer. Miller Lite flowed freely throughout the day. The brew is one change Tawes has seen over the years, Carey said. Baltimore's own Natty Bo used to be shipped "from the Land of Pleasant Living" to add fuel and even more Maryland flavor to the party atmosphere.

Large and in charge

For Del. J.B. Jennings of Phoenix, it was his fourth Tawes.

For his first, in 2002, Jennings, a licensed pilot, flew then-gubernatorial candidate Bob Ehrlich and wife Kendel to Crisfield in his Twin Comanche plane.

Jennings used this year as an opportunity to speak with colleagues about issues in District 7.

But it wasn't all work and no play.

"The lobbyists work. The legislators relax," said Jennings, nodding toward the tent of Bruce Bereano, who was "working" several legislators, but looked to be having a good time doing it.

Fresh off his No. 1 ranking as the state's top-grossing lobbyist, Bereano was back this year with his signature crowded tent and larger-than-life persona.

Bereano stood at the entrance of his tent welcoming visitors with offers of the multi-layered Smith Island Cake.

As Bereano likes to say, "Tawes is the Super Bowl of Maryland politics."