

Our Bay: Gov. Hughes' passion for bay burns bright

By JAMES B. HALE, Capital News Service`

DENTON - Former Gov. Harry Hughes sat recently in his favorite chair at his Denton home and remembered how at one point he had almost lost all hope for the Chesapeake Bay.

Flanked on one side by a painting of himself as governor and on the other by a photo at his inauguration, Hughes reflected on his eight years leading Maryland.

He remembered the fiasco surrounding the move of the Baltimore Colts to Indianapolis. And he laughed when he thought about then Washington, D.C., City Councilmember Marion Barry teasing him for being late to a meeting.

But of all his achievements and memories, the legacy Hughes left behind was a passion for cleaning up the Chesapeake Bay. After caring for the bay on both a personal and legislative level, he said he believes federal inaction nearly destroyed the legacy he worked so hard to establish.

"I'm getting more optimistic than I was, say, five years ago, particularly with the federal government taking the action they're taking," said Hughes. "From everything I've read, the (Environmental Protection Agency) has really done practically nothing insofar as preserving and restoring the health of the bay."

In May, President Barack Obama signed an executive order calling for a renewed effort to clean the bay, a move that prompted the EPA to issue new regulations and goals.

The newly proposed changes give the federal government much more power in reprimanding states within the Chesapeake Bay watershed that do not perform up to new standards.

Focusing on reducing rain water runoff from city streets and large animal farms, the EPA intends to submit a final plan in May.

Some people consider Hughes to be one of the founders of the movement to clean the bay, which has suffered for decades from rampant pollution. In 1984, he helped pass dozens of initiatives that cracked down on waste-management plants, large farms and other sources of pollution. He also put forth the legislation that established the Chesapeake Bay Program.

Although Hughes had always enjoyed the bay, growing up he didn't have a particular passion for it, nor did he ever intend to go into politics, he said.

As a child, Hughes fished and crabbed near his hometown of Denton, back when the water was nowhere near as polluted as it was a few decades later when he was governor.

At the University of Maryland in the 1940s, Hughes' passion was baseball and he always saw himself pitching in the major leagues. After poor coaching and a few injuries, he ended up in law school at George Washington University.

He didn't even consider running for office until a friend convinced him to run for state delegate from Caroline County in 1954. After serving in the House and Senate, Hughes was offered the position of secretary of transportation for the state in 1971.

In 1978, Hughes resigned over a disagreement regarding the construction of a subway system in Baltimore, and was elected governor, defeating then acting Gov. Blair Lee III.

As governor, one of Hughes' platforms was cleaning the bay. After reading an EPA report on the pollution, Hughes and his staffers were struck by the moment to take action, he said.

"I called my staff together and we discussed it and I said 'Let's do something,' " said Hughes. "There had been a lot of studies done and they had been put on the shelf and nothing was ever done. So we decided to do something about it."

Throughout his work for the bay, Hughes said he has seen great support from the public.

"I was in parades, people would yell in the crowds, 'Save the Bay, Save the Bay!' Marylanders love that bay," he said. "That went a long way in getting this stuff done, there's no question about it."

Will Baker, president of the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, said Hughes' 1982 campaign was one of the first times anyone interpreted the "Save The Bay" slogan in a positive manner. Baker said his own foundation wasn't even taken seriously when it used the phrase many years earlier.

"That was a time in which the bay was at its rock bottom," said Baker. "People were fed up and Gov. Hughes responded."

Hughes remembers those early years as ones full of hope and excitement. With so much popular support, passing bay legislation was pretty easy, he said. Opponents came in the forms of housing developers and detergent companies, but nobody posed a very serious threat.

One of his first obstacles was trying to get leaders from other states on board, he said. After months of meetings, Hughes, the governors of Virginia and Pennsylvania, the mayor of Washington, and the administrator of the EPA all signed the first Chesapeake Bay Agreement in 1983.

By signing the agreement, they set up the Chesapeake Bay Program and pledged to meet twice yearly to assess the quality of the bay. The 1987 Chesapeake Bay Agreement, which was signed by Hughes' successor William Donald Schaefer, established rigorous goals of reducing the amount of nitrogen and phosphorous in the bay by 40 percent by 2000.

Hughes said one of his proudest achievements was passing the Chesapeake Bay Critical Areas Protection Act, a plan to control development along the shores of the bay.

Even as the population around the bay grew, he said, more housing developers wanted to build by the water. Passing the bill was a satisfying end to a tough fight, said Hughes.

But he said it was his staff and fellow leaders that truly helped him succeed.

Verna Harrison, executive director of the Keith Campbell Foundation, worked on Hughes' staff and helped get the original bay initiatives off the ground. Although Harrison said she was just a "facilitator," managing the operations that eventually culled ideas, Hughes mentioned both her and staffer John Griffin, now secretary of the Maryland Department of Natural Resources, as big players.

Like Hughes, Harrison grew pessimistic about the future of the bay, and said she realizes now the missteps that were made in the 1980s. New legislation, she said, will hopefully fix that.

"I had started to get concerned several years ago that this just was spinning out of control," said Harrison. "If we don't provide sanctions to people ... we are not going to save this bay."

Democratic state Sen. Paul Pinsky said he looks to Hughes when working on bay legislation himself. The inaction of post-Hughes administrations hurt Hughes' legacy, he said.

"Small steps ... have not been enough to bring the bay back where it needs to be," said Pinsky. "I believe we have let down Gov. Hughes."

Pinsky said Hughes has always expressed concern about the bay to lawmakers in and out of office.

Shaun Adamec, a spokesman for Gov. Martin O'Malley, said the current administration also recognizes Hughes' influence.

"Gov. Hughes fought hard to protect the health of the bay throughout his career, not only as governor but throughout his career serving the people of Maryland," Adamec said in a written statement. "It's a mission the governor shares with Gov. Hughes, and one he is proud to carry on as governor."

Chuck Fox, a senior adviser for the EPA and one of the leaders of the new efforts, used to work for Hughes. Like the governor, he said he has a passion for the bay and has spent much of his career working on cleaning up pollution and raising awareness.

Hughes has shown great dedication to cleaning the bay and new federal legislation simply continues his legacy, Fox said.

Hughes said Fox and the EPA are on the right track. The biggest problem facing the bay in the past decades was money, he said. Otherwise, he said, everybody has been working in a positive direction.

"I'm reasonably confident that the people involved, the scientists, other people, know pretty much what has to be done," said Hughes.

Now he just hopes to live long enough to see progress made. He is no longer the excited young governor that stands in a painting in his living room, but he said he still cares just as deeply about the issue that will always be his legacy.

"The bay is very important to the economy of this state ... and it just would be a shame that we don't restore it. It's Maryland," said Hughes. "I don't know how long I'm going to live, but I hope I live long enough for it to turn around. I'll do my best."