

FREE STUFF'S THE RIGHT STUFF AS SCHAEFER PROWLs THE HALL

The Baltimore Sun | August 20, 2005

OCEAN CITY - William Donald Schaefer wandered the red carpets at the Maryland Association of Counties convention here yesterday with one thing on his mind: free stuff.

Big stuff, little stuff, no matter. He wanted it all, and he wasn't afraid to ask for it: "What are you giving away?" Schaefer, 83, asked the corporate vendors and government agency representatives lining the floor at Ocean City's Roland E. Powell Convention Center. "What have you got over here?"

For Schaefer, Maryland's comptroller, the purpose of the annual convention is to collect giveaways - the pencils and pens, cup holders, Frisbees and calendars - that exhibitors display to lure people into their booths.

This collection racket is no casual thing for Schaefer. It's more an obsession than a hobby. He gets his fix at MACO and at the Maryland Municipal League conference, which was held in June.

"The focus is the stuff; the schmoozing is secondary," said Schaefer, who dressed casually - in pleated jeans, a navy polo shirt and tan sneakers - for his prowl.

Schaefer said he keeps several decades' worth of convention goodies in one room in his second home, an Ocean City property that Hilda Mae Snoops, his longtime

companion, bequeathed to him. The comptroller doesn't wade through his stash, however. He just likes to know that it's there.

"I'm going through it when I retire, and I ain't about to retire," he said.

Schaefer, a former Maryland governor and Baltimore mayor, is known to be grumpy, brusque and demanding at times, sometimes even uncouth. But in the quest for handouts, he is always a gentleman.

He smiles for pictures with exhibitors and greets them with a hearty handshake. He opens his baby-blue eyes wide at the sight of yet another refrigerator magnet or key chain.

'Bargain hunter'

"He's a bargain hunter," said Louise L. Hayman, director of communications in the comptroller's office and an accomplice in yesterday's venture.

"Anything he can get for free he's generally interested in."

Schaefer shook his head no when asked whether growing up in Depression-era Baltimore might have influenced his collecting habits.

"I'm poor," Schaefer said with a bit of a nudge. "I've got to get as many pens and pads as I can possibly get."

With three plastic bags looped over his left wrist, Schaefer trolled the 270 exhibits at MACO. Hayman joined him, as did former scheduler Lainy LeBow-Sachs and Trooper Steve Irving of the state police, who is assigned to Schaefer's detail.

When a bag was filled to Schaefer's liking, he turned it over to Irving to carry. "I have to get me another bag soon," Schaefer said.

"I got some more, sir," Irving said. "I've got some standby ones."

Schaefer's bounty included an insulated fanny pack from Washington Gas Energy Services; a stress ball shaped like a hard hat from the Army Corps of Engineers, Baltimore District; a bumper sticker that said, "Show your pride, Maryland public schools"; and a hot-pink boomerang from his own booth.

The significance of the comptroller's boomerang? "Your tax dollars coming back to you," said Dean Kenderdine, Schaefer's chief of staff.

Schaefer had a particular eye for edibles, such as chocolate kisses and candies, but Lebow-Sachs dissuade him from taking them. Not good for you, she said time and again. Still, Schaefer made a play for an even bigger item, the apple pie at West Recreation Inc.

"Is that a real pie," he asked the woman at the booth. "Can you win it?"

`Special friends'

A few vendors away, Schaefer got one of the exclusive VIP tchotchkes stashed discreetly out of public view.

Sherry Alban, finance director for Maryland EMS, handed him a large canvas portfolio. "That's for our special friends," she said, and Schaefer promptly bagged it.

In general, Schaefer was not discriminating. He snagged everything everyone had to offer, with one exception.

A pen from the Baltimore booth almost found its way into Schaefer's tote until he realized it carried the name of Mayor Martin O'Malley, a frequent target of Schaefer's wrath.

"I am refusing it," Schaefer said, tossing the pen back onto the table. "In fact, there it is."

The items available at MACO have a broader purpose than feeding Schaefer's appetite for convention paraphernalia. Not only do they attract people to the booths, but they also provide a reminder of the company or governmental organization for people when they go home.

Carol Anderson-Austra, acting government affairs officer for the Army Corps of Engineers, Baltimore District, said the corps' giveaways are a reminder "that the corps is involved in many aspects of public life." They also "provide a feel-good message," she said.

Schaefer left MACO with the trunk of his car stuffed to overflowing. Irving, Schaefer's trooper, said he had loaded it with at least 50 full tote bags.

And it was only noon.