

Blount said to decide he won't run in 2002

But dean of state Senate denies saying he's 'done'

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LOS ANGELES — Sen. Clarence W. Blount, the highly regarded dean of the Maryland Senate, told Democratic officials here this week he has decided against running for a ninth term in the 2002 election.

Blount, 79, made his intentions clear at a dinner Tuesday for the state's delegation to the Democratic National Convention, according to a half-dozen people who heard his remarks.

In an interview later, Blount seemed to backtrack and suggested he might decide to run in 2002. He expressed concern about being perceived as a "lame duck" two years before the election.

"Give me some credit," Blount said. "There's no way in the world I would say I'm done two years in advance."

Blount, who represents a large part of West Baltimore, made history as the first African-American to head a standing Senate committee. With his genial manner, the Democratic majority leader is viewed as a beacon of civility in the sometimes fractious Senate. His colleagues sometimes refer to him as "the conscience" of the Senate.

"He's the most respected member in the Senate," said Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller. "People have a very difficult time saying 'no' to Clarence Blount."

A World War II veteran and longtime educator in the Baltimore school system, Blount ran for re-election in 1998 only after Miller and other Democrats begged him. It proved a bitter campaign, marked by his opponent's legal efforts to demonstrate that Blount was no longer living in his district.

The state's highest court eventually allowed Blount's name to remain on the ballot, reversing a lower court ruling, and he won with 68 percent of the vote.

"We did all we could do to get him to run last time," said Sen. Nathaniel J. McFadden, an East Baltimore Democrat. "We got him to run only by promising not to call him again this time."

Blount, who came up through the rough-and-tumble politics of West Baltimore, was first elected to the Senate in 1970 and has been its majority leader for 17 years. He is known for championing legislation to improve health care, job opportunities and education funding for his largely poor district.

An impassioned speech by Blount helped secure the General Assembly's 1997 vote to provide \$254 million in additional state aid for Baltimore's public schools.

Miller said Blount could play a crucial role defending Baltimore's interests as the Senate redraws Maryland's legislative district boundaries in 2002.

Sun staff writer JoAnna Daemmrich contributed to this article.