

Blount not saying if he'll run again

■ **Democrat:** Rumors abound over whether the state Senate's majority leader will seek a new term at age 80.

By IVAN PENN
SUN STAFF

Although he says he is not trying to break any records, eight-term state Sen. Clar-

ence W. Blount is all but assured of going down in Maryland's history books as a state legend.

The 80-year-old Baltimore Democrat has served 31 years in the General Assembly, the longest of any African-American in the history of the legislature.

Now with this year's state races drawing near, rumors abound over whether the legislature's first black majority leader will seek another four years representing West Bal-



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timore's 41st District. Some of the state's top Democratic leaders are actively lobbying him to run again.

"The state of Maryland needs him," said Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller. "I think his wife wants him home. I've just asked her to

continue to make the sacrifice."

Gov. Parris N. Glendening agrees that Blount still has much to offer the state, but he has told the senator that he has "earned the right to think about himself."

"He is an [See Blount, 4A]

Respected:
State Sen.
Clarence W.
Blount wields
enormous
influence for his
Baltimore City
district by virtue
of his long
career as an
educator and his
31 years in the
General
Assembly.

Senator is not saying whether he'll run again

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extraordinary majority leader for the Democratic Party," Glendening said. "He has also served his time."

Blount, a retired career educator, isn't revealing his plans. When asked about running again, he bows his head, gives a bashful kind of grin and offers more of a tease than any details about his future.

"I've been around ... a long time," he says, suggesting he might consider stepping down.

Blount said he does want to spend more time guiding young politicians: "I see a whole lot of bright lights. Part of my hope, and part of my interest and part of me is to see them come on the stage and be successful and shine."

Blount, who has worked with five governors, is widely respected by officials across Maryland, largely for his efforts to ensure the political and academic success of blacks and others across the state.

Critics, however, say respect has led state officials to gloss over the issue of his living in Baltimore County, outside the city district he represents.

Chairs major committee

As majority leader, the slim, bespectacled man who stands 6 feet 3 is one of just a handful of African-Americans who hold similar positions in state legislatures nationwide.

Blount was one of the first African-Americans appointed to chair a standing committee in Maryland's General Assembly and now — as head of Education, Health and Environmental Affairs — is one of four black committee chairmen.

Only one of the other three leads a major panel — Del. Howard P. Rawlings, a Baltimore Democrat who chairs the House Appropriations Committee.

Both Blount and Rawlings have played critical roles in protecting such city interests as the 1997 schools partnership with the state and this year's redistricting process. Democratic leaders often call on them to help build consensus in the party and the legislature.

"Senator Blount brings extraordinary political leadership and balance to our deliberations in the General Assembly," said Rawlings, who at times has been at odds with the senator. "But there



BARBARA H. TAYLOR: SUNSTAFF
Cheerful moment: Clarence W. Blount smiles, right at home in his longtime seat in the Maryland Senate.

are talented individuals in his district who ... with time could achieve his level of influence in the Senate."

Some political observers say he might run for re-election this fall and soon afterward relinquish the seat to a "rising star" — Del. Lisa A. Gladden is mentioned frequently.

Others say he won't leave office until a serious problem — such as the severe back pain he suffered before the last election — prevents him from seeking re-election.

"I think the assumption ought to be that he's going to run," said former Mayor Kurt L. Schmoke. "He loves politics. He thrives on it."

Election after election, delegates have prepared to ascend to Blount's seat, only to find themselves leaving the legislature while he remained in office, he said.

Blount — a husband and father of a grown son and two stepsons — attributes much of his success to his father, Charles J. Blount Sr., who instilled in him the belief that education was the way to "stand up and be a man and enter American life."

Born in rural South Creek, N.C., Clarence Blount moved to Baltimore at age 8. When he arrived, he didn't know how to read or count to 10. His late start delayed his finishing Douglass High School until he was 21 — a fact he hid from his peers at the time.

He entered Morgan State College in September 1941. He was

drafted that October for World War II, seeing action in Italy as a member of the 92nd Infantry Division's all-black Buffalo Soldiers.

In 1946, Blount re-entered Morgan, graduating in 1950. He took a city teaching job and spent 31 years as a Baltimore educator, rising to become vice principal and principal of Dunbar High School.

Blount became a senator in 1971, when the still-Baltimore Colts won the Super Bowl. He had ambitions of becoming an international lawyer or a diplomat, but ulcers cut short his pursuit of a doctorate in international relations.

Instead, Blount remained in education, retiring in 1981 as executive assistant to the president of the then-Community College of Baltimore. Meanwhile, he continued his political career, saying, "you just don't give up power."

Blount is the quiet man who can change the direction of debate in the Senate by rising to speak on a matter. He has been credited with the success of critical issues, particularly those related to Baltimore.

In 1997, his impassioned speech on the Senate floor about Baltimore's schoolchildren helped save a bill that infused \$254 million into the city school system.

Everyone listens

"When he speaks, everyone focuses on him and they listen to every word he says ... probably more than when the president of the Senate is speaking or the governor," Glendening said.

In 2000, Blount gave another speech that Democrats say helped thwart an attempt by Sen. Thomas L. Bromwell, a Baltimore County Democrat, to unseat Miller as Senate president. Bromwell backed off his campaign for Senate president and later reconciled with Miller.

He faced a fight during the last election that nearly ended his career, when former Del. Frank D. Boston Jr. took him to court, arguing that the senator needed to live in the Baltimore district he represented — not in Baltimore County.

Although an Anne Arundel circuit judge agreed with Boston and ordered Blount off the 1998 Democratic primary ballot, the Maryland Court of Appeals overturned the decision and allowed him to run. Blount defeated Boston, capturing nearly 70 percent of the vote.

A month later, in a controversial 29-page opinion explaining its earlier decision, the state's highest court wrote that "the requirement is that one must be domiciled in the district, and domicile is not synonymous with primary place of abode."

The decision came at what officials saw as a critical time for the city and the state. Blount was urged to run one more time to help ensure that Baltimore was protected in the legislative redistricting process this year.

Although the state has completed the redistricting process and Blount has fulfilled three decades in politics, Miller and others still aren't ready for him to leave. Even so, Blount isn't saying what his final decision will be.

"I really don't think anybody can guess what I'm going to do," he said. "They're trying, but that's all."