

The Political Game 6-9-78

Senate primary brewing in 41st

Challenge: A hot contest is shaping up for the West Baltimore seat held by the Senate majority leader.

By WILLIAM F. ZORZI JR.
SUN STAFF

EVERY ONCE IN a while, a stone is heaved into the political waters of Annapolis that sends out ripples whose ultimate effect can't be told.

Such a rock was dropped Wednesday night at Boccaccio Restaurant in Baltimore's Little Italy.

At a crowded, \$100-a-head fund-raiser, Del. Frank D. Boston Jr. announced that he was moving ahead with long-rumored plans to challenge Senate Majority Leader Clarence W. Blount for the 41st District seat in the September Democratic primary.

Boston, 59, is taking a chance by taking on Blount, 77, the highly respected elder statesman of the Maryland Senate and a warhorse who has been a key player in the city's black political hierarchy.

But, the way Boston sees it this year, "it's either up or out" for him.

So he's in, whether Blount decides to run for an eighth term or not.

Blount's retirement has been talked about for some time — he has had a couple of bouts with illness in recent years, and his family would like to see him call it quits — but it is by no means a sure thing.

Friends and colleagues — including Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller, who would lose a close personal and political ally if Blount leaves — are encouraging him to run again.

"It has been the most agonizing decision of my life," Blount said.

But if Blount has made up his mind, he is holding it close, "keeping my powder dry," as he is wont to say. He has told friends he will not make his decision known until next month.

The filing deadline for



'Up or out': Del. Frank D. Boston Jr. is running.



Elder statesman: Sen. Clarence W. Blount is not saying.

candidates is July 6, giving any takers a very short time to put a campaign together before the Sept. 15 primary.

If Blount does not run again, or is defeated, it would leave a huge void in Annapolis.

He is Miller's majority leader, is chairman of the Economic and Environmental Affairs Committee and continues to have sway over city senators. Baltimore Mayor Kurt L. Schmoke and Gov. Parris N. Glendening listen to him, and he is held in high esteem by legislators from around the state.

His exit would cut into Baltimore's power base at the State House at a time when the city will need all the help it can get, with redistricting coming up in the next term. It would diminish the power of blacks in ranking positions in the Senate, no matter who might replace him. It could even have some impact on Miller's effectiveness as the presiding officer.

None of that is directly Boston's fault, of course. Blount eventually will leave the Senate some way.

But what Boston's candidacy could mean is political war in West Baltimore — either with Blount or others.

As a three-term member of the House of Delegates, Boston is a viable contender for the Senate seat.

He is chairman of the city's House delegation and has carried water for Schmoke in that role since 1991, successfully fending off a number of challenges to the position. He is also a member of the influential Economic Matters Committee.

Miller calls him "a formidable candidate ... known for his independent ways, at times."

Nevertheless, Miller makes clear that if Blount decides to run again, his considerable political weight — and that of much of the Senate — will be behind his majority leader.

Should Blount run and win, it is unlikely that he would complete the four-year term. At some point, he would resign his seat and certainly would like to be able to name his successor. That could only happen, however, if he retains control of the five-member

Democratic central committee for the 41st, seats that are also up this year.

The race would clearly be a test of Blount's aging organization, a challenge that would be further complicated this year by, of all things, gubernatorial politics.

In recent years, Blount has depended on the machinery of Schmoke and Larry S. Gibson, the mayor's political godfather, for help in the district at election time.

In this year's Democratic primary, however, they are in the rare position of being on different sides of the fence. Blount is supporting Glendening, and the Schmoke-Gibson organization is behind Harford County Executive Eileen M. Rehrmann.

How that would shake out is almost anyone's guess.

If Blount does not seek re-election, however, it is highly unlikely that Boston will get a free ride.

Earlier this year, there was much speculation about Blount's possible retirement and a resulting primary fight between Boston and Del. Nathaniel T. Oaks, another member of the 41st District delegation interested in the Senate seat.

Although Oaks hired political consultant Julius Henson — who has put together a stable of candidates in the city — he seems to be content, at least for the moment, to run for re-election to the House.

That could change in an instant, and certainly would if Blount decides to sit this one out.

Oaks, a scrappy campaigner with a loyal following along the district's Edmondson Avenue corridor, would give Boston a good fight. Others too timid to challenge Blount in the past also could weigh in.

But Boston will be ready. Having raised money, put together a slate and begun to paper the district with slick campaign literature, signs and bumper stickers, he has a good head start.