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There goes the judge, here comes the candidate

By Patrick Gilbert
Sun Staff Writer

After a five-year silence, the Lion of Halethorpe is ready to roar again. John Carroll Coolahan, former state senator and former District Court judge, is prowling once more over the political landscape.

Just one day after his official retirement as a judge, the Halethorpe Democrat was able to say loudly today what he has been telling people quietly for five months — he is running for Baltimore County executive.

Unlike other Democratic candidates, Mr. Coolahan — the sometimes gruff, almost always direct politician whose distinctive tawny mane has thinned and turned to silver — did not make an official announcement. He went to the media one-by-one.

"I don't need a coming-out party," he said, dropping by in pastel-striped polo shirt, tan slacks and white walking shoes.

Mr. Coolahan, 61, said if he is elected he will renew the push for replacing the property tax with a personal income tax, advocate an elected school board, beef up the police narcotics unit, drive his own car to work and abolish the executive's police security unit.

"I've always liked politics — it's an avocation rather than a vocation — and I think my conservative views are more in line with the voters of this county than those of the other candidates," he said.

Mr. Coolahan, said he will be a no-frills candidate.

"That's because I have no frills," he said. He said he hopes to raise about \$50,000 for bumper stickers, a few television advertisements and a lot of radio ads. His campaign

staff will consist mainly of himself.

Mr. Coolahan picked up the Lion of Halethorpe handle from an *Evening Sun* story in 1976 when he led a six-day Senate filibuster in an attempt to defeat funding for the subway. The nickname stuck.

Mr. Coolahan has been out of politics since 1989 when he stepped down from the Senate seat he had held for all but four years since 1971 to take a District Court judgeship.

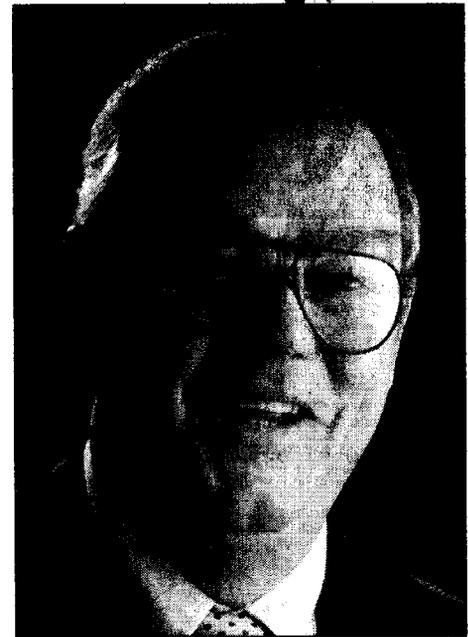
He said the five-year hiatus won't be a hindrance. He noted that a recent poll taken by Del. Joseph Bartenfelder — who had considered a run for executive — showed his name recognition still is good.

This will be his second try for executive. Mr. Coolahan ran in 1978 but finished second behind the Democratic nominee Donald P. Hutchinson who went on to be elected.

This year, as he did 16 years ago, Mr. Coolahan will be sharing his southwestern county base with a candidate named Murphy. In 1978, it was County Councilman John V. "Jack" Murphy who finished fourth in the primary, about 4,000 votes behind Mr. Coolahan. This year, it's state Sen. Nancy L. Murphy.

Other major candidates who have announced in the primary for executive are county councilmen Charles A. Dutch Ruppersberger III and Melvin G. Mintz.

Mr. Coolahan said he is confident he can beat Mrs. Murphy in their home base and that doing well on the Eastside and in Towson are keys to his victory. But Eastside politicians such as state Sen. Michael J. Collins said they have yet to decide whom they will support. Since there is no candidate



SUN STAFF PHOTO/1994

John Coolahan is running for executive

from the Eastside, the aim is for Eastside politicians to collectively support one candidate. "It still is too early to make a commitment," said Mr. Collins. "And it might well end up that we make no endorsement."

Mrs. Murphy said it has been well documented in conversations Mr. Coolahan has had with others that he is in the race to knock her out.

Mr. Coolahan said he has nothing against Mrs. Murphy except that he feels he would make a better county executive. He said he has heard the suggestions he is in the race just to hurt her chances.

"I'm not going to retire from an \$83,000-a-year job just to stop Nancy Murphy," he said. "I may be foolish, but I'm not an idiot. I'm serious about this campaign. I want to win."