

The Sun

For voters, crime is top consideration
Residents have scant knowledge of judicial candidates
Gelfman's name recognized
Sitting judges make pointed statements about criminals

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Deborah Klos, a registered nurse living in a modest townhouse in Columbia's Harper's Choice village, is like a lot of voters in Howard County -- not sure how to vote in the circuit court judges race but deeply concerned about crime.

"It's increasing. It is becoming a problem, much more so than five years ago," said Klos, 45, a Democrat. "I've seen open drug dealing right in my back yard. It's scary now."

Recent interviews with more than 90 voters throughout Howard County -- from the blue-collar Democratic stronghold of Savage to Republican West Friendship -- revealed only scattered knowledge of the candidates for the judges race.

But crime seems nearly a preoccupation with voters this year, suggesting that District Judge Lenore R. Gelfman and attorney Jonathan Scott Smith -- who have stressed a get-tough-on-crime message -- may have an effective pitch going into the final weeks before the Nov. 5 election.

The sitting judges, Diane O. Leasure and Donna Hill Staton, who as judges are bound by strict ethical rules restricting their public statements during the campaign, began fighting back last week on the crime issue with more pointed statements -- even as they noted that judges have little power to stop crime.

Over the past two decades, Howard County's per capita crime rate has gone down while the total number of crimes in the rapidly growing county has risen, according to police data.

Nonetheless, crime appears to be the most-powerful issue in the minds of voters.

"I've got a young daughter," said Colin Knight-Griffin, 58, an undecided voter in a Glenelg neighborhood of large homes with colorful trees and burglar alarms. "I care whether she gets molested or whatever. I just want these people put away."

Dexter Smith, 38, an engineer and father of two in Columbia's affluent River Hill village, said, "I don't even know anyone directly who's had their house broken into, but we all worry about it."

The judges race began nearly a year ago, when Gov. Parris N. Glendening appointed Leasure and Hill Staton, the first female judges on Howard County's Circuit Court. Hill Staton is also the court's first black judge in a county that is 12 percent black.

To keep their 15-year seats, both have to win an election against all comers.

Rapid challenge

Gelfman, a judge on the lower District Court, and Smith, with experience as a criminal defense attorney and prosecutor, quickly challenged Leasure and Hill Staton as inexperienced in criminal matters and products of political gamesmanship by Glendening.

The brutal and expensive primary battle in March hinged on such issues, with Leasure and Hill Staton winning the Democratic primary and Gelfman and Smith winning the Republican primary -- even though Gelfman is a registered Democrat.

In the last several weeks of serious campaigning for the general election, Smith -- and to a lesser extent, Gelfman -- have made crime and the fear of it the central theme of their campaign literature and television ads.

The sitting judges have responded with pointed ads on cable television, arguing that Smith, because much of his law practice is criminal defense, is a hypocrite. They level the same charge against Gelfman, who has talked tough on crime but once gave an 18-month sentence to a repeat drunk-driver convicted of vehicular homicide while intoxicated so that he could receive treatment for alcoholism.

Carol Arscott, campaign consultant for the sitting judges, explained the strategy: "You point out over the course of your campaign that the two people raising the issue are hypocrites. Voters don't like hypocrites."

Conservative support

The Gelfman-Smith message seems to have had the greatest effect in Ellicott City, a reliably conservative stretch of Howard County where fear of crime has grown along with the convenience store and gas station robberies along its main thoroughfare, U.S. 40.

In 20 interviews in the affluent suburban communities of Dunloggin and Waverly Woods, the names of Gelfman and Smith are relatively well-known.

"I'm for Gelfman and Smith. I like what they say in their commercials," said JoAnn G. Sorbo, 42, a Republican homemaker in Waverly Woods. "It's time to crack down a little bit more on criminals. I feel like crime is getting a little bit out of hand, and I'm getting tired of it."

Equally important to some voters is the contention by Gelfman and Smith that the sitting judges won their posts mainly because of Glendening's politics.

"Glendening put {Leasure and Hill Staton} on the bench because of diversity, when we really need the best candidates," said Robert F. Bradford, 56, a Democrat and retired federal employee who lives in Dunloggin.

'Abysmal campaign'

The exception in Ellicott City was Anthony F. Hammond, 64, a Dunloggin doctor who once hired Leasure to review a real estate contract for him: "I resent the abysmal campaign that's being run. I fault Gelfman and Smith."

Leasure and Hill Staton have waged a quieter, far less public campaign, relying mostly on TV ads, mailings and their stature on the bench. Perhaps as a result, voters recently interviewed by The Sun seemed less familiar with them.

But Kathleen Stirling, a 45-year-old Elkridge Democrat, said that, in their campaign, the sitting judges have shown more of a judicial temperament than the challengers.

Both of the challengers applied for the judgeships to which Leasure and Hill Staton were appointed. "They had been part of the process until they lost," Stirling said. "If they don't like the rules, they try to remake them."

Interviews around Columbia, a Democratic stronghold, suggested low awareness of the race and an even split of support between the two tickets.

Gisela Coley, 53, an accountant who lives in a single-family home in Oakland Mills, said she strongly backs the sitting judges because of the need for diversity on the court.

"My daughter just became an attorney, and I see it being really important to get some different types of people on the court," said the registered Democrat.

She said she planned to dust off her Leasure-Hill Staton sign from the primary and put it back out in front of her home.

Democratic Party loyalist Bob Wills, 55, a retired federal employee in Harper's Choice village, said he too worries about crime but that other issues are more important.