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HEADLINE: Race begins for open seat in 7th District; Potential successors to Mfume include office-holders; 'Safe' seat for Democrats; Congressman's nod and Parren Mitchell's is seen as critical

BYLINE: William F. Zorzi Jr. and JoAnna Daemmrich, SUN STAFF

SOURCE: Maryland Election Code; Maryland attorney general's office

BODY:

The surprise announcement that Rep. Kweisi Mfume was leaving Congress in February to head the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People caught many Maryland politicians flat-footed.

Although no one has declared an intention to run, at the top of just about everyone's short list of potential candidates for the 7th District congressional seat is the Rev. Frank M. Reid III, Mayor Kurt L. Schmoke's step-brother and pastor of West Baltimore's Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Mr. Mfume's announcement Saturday sent potential candidates scurrying and set observers' tongues wagging yesterday as area officeholders speculated as to who might succeed the five-term Democratic congressman from West Baltimore.

Mr. Reid, 44, said he is considering entering the race but has not made up his mind. He said he would seek direction through prayer and from his wife and family, as well as from the bishop and his congregation.

"I'm not ruling it in and I'm not ruling it out," he said. "I'm honored that folk have considered my name."

But while Mr. Reid would be viewed as a formidable candidate if he decides to run in the special Democratic primary election, he certainly is not alone in being mentioned as a possibility -- or in expressing interest.

Also high on every short list of potential candidates is Del. Elijah E. Cummings, 44, speaker pro tem of the Maryland House of Delegates, a four-term legislator from West Baltimore's 44th District who has Mr. Schmoke's ear.

"I'm going to look at it carefully over the next week and come to some conclusions," said Mr. Cummings, a lawyer who said he would give up his practice if he decided to run.

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Another is Del. Salima Siler Marriott, 55, a second-term delegate from West Baltimore's 40th District and a professor at Morgan State University.

Ms. Marriott could not be reached for comment yesterday.

Other possibilities

After those three, the list gets longer and wider.

Del. Howard P. "Pete" Rawlings, a political power in West Baltimore, said he was not interested.

State Sen. Larry Young, whose name had been mentioned as a possible candidate, said he had not entirely ruled out a bid but strongly suggested he would not run.

Among the others mentioned yesterday were Vera P. Hall, the former 5th District councilwoman and former chairwoman of the Maryland Democratic Party who has enjoyed the backing of state Sen. Clarence W. Blount; 4th District City Councilwoman Sheila Dixon; and Stuart O. Simms, the former city state's attorney who now heads the state Department of Juvenile Services.

Another is Lawrence A. Bell III, the newly elected City Council president whose campaign was strongly supported by Mr. Mfume, his cousin.

Mr. Bell was coy yesterday, saying that he wanted to talk to Mr. Mfume and that he was not ruling out the possibility of seeking the office.

"We'll see," he said. "Right now, I'm most concerned about the mechanics of city government, but I just have to weigh a lot of different things."

Even City Solicitor Neal M. Janey said yesterday that he would consider running for the seat -- unless Mr. Reid got into the race. If that were the case, "It's over," he said.

Although the seat is generally viewed as a West Side seat, the 7th District now extends into East Baltimore, where the names of other possible candidates were floated yesterday.

Among them were state Sen. Nathaniel J. McFadden, who would have the powerful Eastside Democratic Organization behind him, and former City Council President Mary Pat Clarke, who waved off the notion, saying, "I don't see myself as a candidate."

Key to a decision to run will be the nod from Mr. Mfume and his predecessor, former Rep. Parren J. Mitchell.

Their pick, if there is one, apparently has not been determined.

Meetings scheduled

In the meantime, meetings have been set for this week among city -- and a handful of county -- political leaders to determine who is jockeying for position and how the support is shaping up.

The growing speculation that Mr. Reid would get into the race came as something of a surprise to Mr. Schmoke.

"It's news to me," the mayor said, adding that Mr. Reid had not expressed an interest in seeking any political office in the past.

But Mr. Schmoke said he believes Mr. Reid could mount a strong campaign and suggested he would be likely to support his stepbrother if he chooses to run.

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Mr. Reid is pastor of one of Baltimore's largest and most influential black churches, with a congregation of more than 10,000.

The congregation has a long history of political involvement and came out strongly in support of Comptroller Joan M. Pratt.

Schmoke remarks

Mr. Schmoke said that if Mr. Reid does not run, he would likely steer clear of throwing his support behind any other candidate.

"What I would face would probably be a contest between real close friends, all of whom supported me this summer" in his bid for a third term, he said.

The district was gerrymandered to give Mr. Mfume a concentration of the black vote in Baltimore city and county, and cuts an L-shaped swath that extends into East Baltimore.

Nearly 80 percent of the district is in Baltimore City, with the rest in the county, from Catonsville, up through Randallstown and reaching nearly to Reisterstown.

Nearly three-quarters of the voters in the 7th District are members of minority groups, and 71 percent of that number are black.

While it would appear unlikely that a Republican could be elected in the 7th District, the GOP is expected to field a candidate.

Filling the vacancy

Here are key points in electing someone to complete the remaining 11 months of Rep. Kweisi Mfume's fifth term in Congress.

* Unlike a U.S. Senate vacancy, the governor does not appoint the successor to a member of the House of Representatives who leaves before the end of a term. Once the governor is notified of a vacancy, he has 10 days to issue a proclamation setting dates for a special election.

* The date selected for the special congressional primary -- when Democratic and Republican nominees are selected -- must be at least 35 days after the proclamation is issued and on a Tuesday. The special election -- in which those nominees and any independent candidates square off -- must be at least 35 days after the special primary and on a Tuesday.

* Next year, Marylanders ordinarily would elect members of Congress. The presidential and congressional primary is March 5. The governor could select March 5 as the date of the 7th District's special primary election. Having both elections on the same date would save Baltimore city and county election boards the effort -- and taxpayers the cost -- of holding two primary elections on separate dates.

* The filing deadline for the March 5 primary is Dec. 26. The filing deadline for the special primary depends on the date the governor picks for that race.

* Because the vacancy would occur within 60 days of a regularly scheduled primary, the governor could leave the seat vacant for the 11 months left in the term -- a possibility considered highly unlikely. If he did exercise that option, the winner of the regularly scheduled 1996 general election Nov. 5 would take over the seat in January 1997.

GRAPHIC: COLOR PHOTO, PERRY THORSVIK : SUN STAFF, Contender? Observers say the Rev. Frank M. Reid

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III would be a strong candidate.; MAP, SUN STAFF, 7th Congressional District

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