

Race is in state of flux

Baltimore County executive hopefuls watching Bromwell; Senator considering run; Entry of Democrat into campaign could have broad impact

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They are sniffing for support and chatting up friends. They are rubbing elbows and recalculating odds.

But the politicians who would succeed C. A. Dutch Ruppertsberger as Baltimore County executive next year know their future hinges on one simple question: What is Tommy doing?

"Tommy" is Thomas L. Bromwell, the plain-spoken, ambitious state senator from Perry Hall who observers agree is the linchpin to the short-term future of Baltimore County Democratic politics.

A Bromwell decision to run for executive would change the shape of the race.

Contenders would be hard-pressed to match the fund-raising capability he enjoys as chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, which regulates the health, insurance, banking and energy industries, among others.

Bromwell would enjoy strong support on the county's politically active east side, traditionally considered vital in a countywide election. Fellow east-sider Joseph Bartenfelder, a county councilman from Fullerton and a possible executive candidate, says he would not run against Bromwell.

Without an east-side split, potential candidates such as Councilmen Kevin Kamenetz from Pikesville and Stephen G. Samuel Moxley of Catonsville would face a tougher election battle.

Bromwell is considering his choices.

"I'm leaning. No question I'm leaning. I'm looking at it very seriously. I don't want to be fickle about it," Bromwell, 52, said in an interview last week. "I've got the seniority. I've got the experience. I've got the ability to raise money."

Bromwell said that he or any of the other most-frequently mentioned candidates could master the day-to-day functions of county government. But his ability to deliver state funds for school construction or other needs, he said, could truly help county residents.

"If you just follow what Dutch has done for the last seven or eight years, it should be a no-brainer," Bromwell said. "It's that little extra you get out of Annapolis that makes the difference in the quality of life. And that's where I think I can make a difference."

The senator said he feels no deadline pressure to make a decision, though the futures of several other leaders hinge on what he does.

Despite his status as the county's ranking Democrat, Ruppertsberger might not play a visible role in choosing his successor. Prevented by term limits from running again, the executive likely will be concentrating on a run for governor or other political office. He has said he will support whoever wins his party's primary. Registered Democrats outnumber Republicans by more than two to one in Baltimore County.

But Ruppertsberger and some of his allies are close to Circuit Judge James T. Smith Jr., who is considering stepping down when his 15-year judicial term expires this year and running for executive.

Smith has indicated he is interested in the office, but neither he nor any other Democrats have formally announced their candidacy. One Republican is officially in the race: attorney Douglas B. Riley, a former county councilman from Towson.

"A good politician keeps his options open. That's why no one is committing himself at this stage," said Kamenetz. "I consider myself a good politician."

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Kamenetz agrees that his election chances improve if the field is larger and the strength of home territory becomes more important. But he questions the conventional wisdom that the election will be decided in Dundalk, Essex and other east-side communities.

Census figures show that western and northern precincts gained population, while the east side shrank, Kamenetz said. "It suggests to me there could be a new balance of power, on the west side of the county," he said.

Tough to beat

Moxley, the Catonsville councilman, acknowledges that Bromwell would be tough to beat.

"I'm still considering it, but I'm not going to be a fool about it. He has experience. He has name recognition. But he also has the ability to raise money. Unfortunately, that is a big key to a countywide race," Moxley said.

At Bromwell's next fund-raiser, June 12, donors who want to attend a private reception will be asked to pay \$1,000. The senator said that he would expect to have from \$400,000 to \$500,000 in the bank before making an announcement. The race could cost \$1 million or more.

Perhaps because of Bromwell's ponderings, few other potential candidates have lined up the support of big-money donors who can steer cash to campaigns, observers say.

"I don't think there are very many commitments," said political consultant Nick Schloeder. "This is an exploratory period for any election in 2002. It is really early."

The situation leaves other politicians in limbo. If Bromwell runs for executive, a Senate seat opens up. If Bartenfelder then runs for Senate, a council seat opens up.

'Tommy holds the keys'

"I guess Tommy holds the keys to a lot of decisions," said Del. Katherine Klausmeier, a Perry Hall Democrat. "He likes to be the key holder."

Klausmeier is interested in Bromwell's Senate seat, but said she can be patient.

"I just do what I have to do, continue to work and do my delegate duties, and work on the issues I have been working on," she said.

Likewise, Timothy Caslin, a county police lieutenant who is raising money for a 2002 campaign - most likely for Bartenfelder's council seat - said he doesn't mind waiting, at least until after he retires from the Police Department on Dec. 31.

"If I knew then, I'd feel good," Caslin said. "That's when I'm full-time campaigning."

One unanswered question is how badly Bromwell wants to be executive, if at all. Ruppertsberger's calendar is jammed with meetings, dinners, proclamations and ceremonies. He must worry about everything from clearing snow from county streets to ensuring the county has enough foster homes for troubled children. It's a time-consuming job, which might not be attractive to someone whose youngest children are ages 5 and 6.

"This isn't going to be a decision that Tom Bromwell makes on his own," the senator said. "The family will be part of the decision-making. To be county executive, you have to be out there. But to be a good county executive, you have to be a good father and a good husband. There will be times when I'll have to say no [to appearance requests]. That's management style."