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Nation

World

Metro

Politics

Crime

Government

Sports

Lobby

Opinion

Religion

Columnists

The District

Maryland

E.P. Corley

Schools

Crime

Government

Race Issues

Opinion

Special Reports

Photo Galleries

Live Online

Metro Index

Business

Technology

Sports

Style

Education

Travel

Health

Real Estate

Home & Garden

Food

Opinion

Weather

Weekly Sections

News Digest

Classifieds

Print Edition

Archives

Site Index

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Primary Race In Md. Raises Age-Old Issue

By Matthew Mosk

Washington Post Staff Writer

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Jim Noll was in the driveway of his Beltsville home yesterday, under the open hood of a cherry-red 1964 Chevelle convertible, when John A. Giannetti Jr. approached from the street with a breathless, 18-second political pitch.

The Prince George's County Democrat introduced himself, rattled off a list of endorsements he's received, then punctuated his spiel with the not-so-subtle theme of his campaign to unseat state Sen. Arthur Dorman (D), who at 75 is one of the Maryland legislature's oldest and longest-serving members.

"I just want you to see my energy," Giannetti, a member of the House of Delegates, said as Noll nodded and wiped grease from his hands. "I want you to see that I'm bringing something different to this race."

What's different, though Giannetti never specifically says so, is his age -- a message that is unmistakable as the lanky 38-year-old lawyer speed-walks his way along Brandon Lane, passing out fliers emblazoned with the slogan "It's Time!"

Dorman's age has become the focal point of a fierce Democratic primary race that is one of the most bruising political battles being waged for a seat in the Maryland Senate this year.

With the Sept. 10 primary just three weeks away, both camps have settled into a rhythm of charges and countercharges. Giannetti's camp has accused Dorman of fabricating a letter of support that was sent to the local paper. And he's knocked Dorman for a Web site posting of the 1998 endorsements he received, even though he has since lost the support of several of those groups.

Dorman, meanwhile, has snapped at his opponent for deriding his age and for trying to twist his senior status in the General Assembly into a liability.

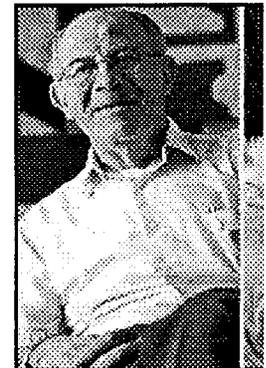
In the air-conditioned calm of his Laurel campaign headquarters yesterday, Dorman accused Giannetti of running for office with only one plank in his platform: unbridled personal ambition.

"No one knows what he stands for," he said softly. "All we hear about is my age. Well, I'm as active as I was 20 years ago."

Dorman dismissed as "phony" Giannetti's complaints about his campaign tactics, brushing off accusations that he fabricated a letter of endorsement that appeared in the Laurel Leader, purportedly signed by Etna Casula, the widow of Laurel's longtime mayor, Frank Casula. One of Dorman's campaign workers wrote the letter, and Dorman said he mailed it after Casula gave her consent.

But Casula later told the Laurel Leader that she had told Dorman she

advertise



Left, Sen. Art Dorman in his L. office. Del. John Giannetti, right door-to-door in Beltsville, Md. The Washington Post)

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But Casula later told the Laurel Leader that she had told Dorman she did not want the letter printed. Giannetti seized on the episode, sending out a news release declaring, "Dorman exposed on forged letter."

The skirmish marked a low point in a campaign defined by bickering and personal slights. And while he has found the negative tone of the race distasteful, Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr. (D) said it can be healthy.

"It's good to have these types of challenges and these clashes of ideas in a primary so the citizens can choose," he said.

Miller said he's supporting Dorman, an incumbent who he said offers the wisdom and seniority of 3 legislatures. But he said Dorman is vulnerable because he was forced to miss 10 weeks of the 12-week last year because of health problems.

Giannetti said it was Dorman's absence that prompted him to run. And it has clearly helped define his campaign. Placing signs along Route 1 with a photo of his boyish face, Giannetti has designed a campaign to exude youthful energy. He has walked so much that his shoes are worn. His arms are blotched with poison ivy. He has back weeded to hammer down his signs. And every element of his sales pitch emphasizes his age.

But there are serious differences between the candidates, beyond their ages.

Dorman, for instance, opposes plans for an intercounty connector, the highway that would create a conduit between Montgomery and Prince George's counties. "It will dump traffic right into the middle of the county," Dorman said.

Giannetti supports the proposed road, telling voters it would provide some relief to the clogged Capital Beltway, which shoots up the center of the 21st District.

The two also differ on a proposal to legalize slot machine gambling at horse-racing tracks -- including on federal plans to build a magnetic-levitation train between Baltimore and Washington. Dorman opposes the ideas, while Giannetti supports them.

No polling has been done to signal how the conflicting positions are playing with voters, but on a street in Beltsville with Giannetti yesterday, there was ample evidence that his emphasis on age is resonating with voters.

Beltsville is Dorman's neighborhood, a precinct he carried overwhelmingly in the last election, and it is also for Giannetti, who has represented Laurel for four years in the House of Delegates.

Onda and Michael Selmer have lived there for 40 years and said they have always voted for Dorman. When Giannetti came to their door yesterday, they were receptive.

"We've always liked Art and always voted for him," Onda Selmer told Giannetti. "But I think it might be time for new blood."

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