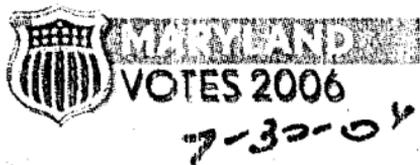


Della pushes unity in the 46th

Tough talk gets both sides' attention



BY DOUG DONOVAN
[SUN REPORTER]

It's no secret that Maryland Democrats want party unity in their bid to retake the governor's mansion.

But marshaling a unified effort isn't always easy. It often means eliminating Democratic competition in primary elections for General Assembly seats and steering unchallenged incumbents' resources to the top-ticket candidate.

How that gets done can be a critical yet often ugly element of politics. And one that rarely plays out in public.

But in South Baltimore's 46th District, Sen. George W. Della Jr. has employed tough tactics to try to prevent and curtail costly primary and general election challenges for himself and his three incumbent House of Delegates colleagues. Why? Because he wants to deliver his political fiefdom's cash and votes to Mayor Martin O'Malley.

Mike Mitchell, a Democrat running against the district's three House of Delegates incumbents, said Della attempted several times to force him out of the race, a charge Della confirmed. And Keith Losoya, Della's Republican Senate opponent, claimed the

veteran lawmaker tried to intimidate one of his top donors, an assertion Della denies.

"Sen. George Della sought to dissuade me from running for delegate through verbal and other means," said Mitchell, 36, executive director for Chesapeake Habitat for Humanity.

Since Mitchell began his campaign last year, Della, the 46th District's senior legislator, has pressured the housing advocate not to run. First, he tried personal entreaties to party loyalty. Next, he contacted Mitchell's boss. Then, last month, Della told Mitchell he would support him for a Democratic State Central Committee position if he agreed to bow out.

Mitchell refused and remains in the race against incumbent Dels. Peter A. Hammen, Carolyn J. Krysiak and Brian K. McHale. There is one other Democratic challenger, Donald Nygard, but he is little known and does not even list a phone number or a Baltimore address.

"I asserted that my candidacy would be healthy for the process and that my message of building Baltimore's tax base and getting rid of vacant housing was most important to our future, which is why I declined his overtures," Mitchell said.

Della said he did call Mitchell's boss, Patricia Stout, owner of the Baltimore Window Factory and former chairwoman of Mitchell's nonprofit organization.

"Maybe I came on too strong with him, but I am truly concerned about the outcome of this general election" between O'Malley and Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr., Della said.

Conserving resources

Della, a 63-year-old Federal Hill resident who has represented the district since 1983, said his November conversation with Stout was meant to explain that Mitchell's primary challenge would drain district resources that could otherwise support O'Malley. Della said he also told her that four more years of Ehrlich could make it harder for him to secure money for Mitchell's group.

Said Della: "I called her and said, 'I don't understand what's going on here. Did I do something wrong? Here I am helping you with housing stock and protecting funds in the state. It's like biting the hand that feeds you.'"

Stout said she felt he was threatening the group with a loss of funds if she was unable to persuade Mitchell to drop out, something she refused to do.

"[Della] knows a lot of people. He's pretty influential. People are afraid of him," said Stouf, who stepped down in July as Habitat's chairwoman. "It's a free country. That's what I thought the Democrats were all about."

Della said he was simply trying to convince Mitchell of the implications of his campaign.

"Now we have to spend money on the primary that should have been spent in the general election," he said. "O'Malley can't raise the same kind of money that the incumbent governor can."

Baltimore City Councilman Keifer J. Mitchell Jr., a Della supporter and Democratic Party vice president, said Della's actions with Mike Mitchell (no relation) are typical "South Baltimore politics."

"Everyone has a right to run, but in a race like this that is supposed to be close, the party is try-

ing ... to avoid what happened in 2002 when the party was split," Councilman Mitchell said. "We're going up against a Republican Party that is going to be well-funded, and every dollar helps."

Losoya, Della's Republican rival, claims Della partially thwarted his most recent fundraiser.

Losoya, the past president of the Federal Hill Neighborhood Association, said former Baltimore Raven and fledgling developer Michael McCrary was set to headline his July 20 fundraiser, but that he backed out after a meeting with Della. Losoya said McCrary told him that Della had informed him at that meeting that it was unwise for developers to publicly support a candidate.

"In District 46, you're not supposed to have choice," said Losoya, 39, executive director of

Chesapeake Sustainable Business Alliance.

Della said that he did meet with McCrary before Losoya's fundraiser but that the talk centered almost entirely on McCrary's Federal Hill housing project.

"[McCrary] brought up the fact that his name was associated with [the fundraiser], and that he's not familiar with the [political] lay of the land," Della said. "Could you imagine me strong-arming this guy who is by all appearances still a professional athlete?"

"I was left with the sense that he's not involved in politics and doesn't want to be," Della said. "I said, 'Well, that's fine.' I didn't twist that man's arm."

Della and Losoya said McCrary would support them, but the former Raven could not be reached for comment.

Della's actions with Mitchell and his alleged actions with McCrary are being highlighted by the state GOP, which has tried to cast the Democratic Party as a monopoly in state politics that will stop at nothing to get its way. The strategy positions Ehrlich as a check on

that power.

'Mob boss tactics'

"George Della's actions are classic mob boss tactics of intimidation and threats," said Republican Party spokeswoman Audra Miller. "What we've seen statewide from the Democratic Party's good ol' boys is backroom deals. If you deviate, you get threatened and pushed out."

Councilman Mitchell said Miller's criticism was disingenuous because both parties try to eliminate primary competition in order to conserve resources.

"Each party is going to do what they have to do to be unified," he said.

Matthew Crenson, a political scientist at the Johns Hopkins University, said Della's actions — and those of most incumbents — are also aimed at maintaining their power by helping fellow incumbents get re-elected.

"It's not just a matter of saving money, it's also a matter of maximizing influence," he said. "This is business as usual."

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