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The Baltimore Sun

October 18, 1994, Tuesday, HOWARD EDITION

SECTION: LOCAL (NEWS), Pg. 1B

LENGTH: 874 words

HEADLINE: Madden gets support of key coalition
CAMPAIGN 1994

BYLINE: Adam Sachs, Sun Staff Writer

BODY:

Over the years, the Maryland League of Conservation Voters has given Democratic Del. Virginia M. Thomas high marks.

Yesterday, however, the league said closer scrutiny of her voting record shows that Ms. Thomas is not a reliable friend of the environment. Calling her "duplicitous," the environmental coalition endorsed her opponent, Republican Del. Martin G. Madden, for the state Senate in District 13.

"We're here to bust the myth that Ginny Thomas is for the environment," said Nancy Davis, a conservation league board member and chairwoman of the state Sierra Club's legislative committee. "She postures in Howard County, but some of the things she does in Annapolis show otherwise."

Mr. Madden said the endorsement demonstrates his consistency in supporting environmental protection. Ms. Thomas countered that the conservation league is "grasping at straws" to cast aspersions on her environmental record.

"I think they decided they would endorse Madden and figured out how to back into it," she said.

Told that Democratic Sen. Thomas M. Yeager announced yesterday that he was breaking party ranks to endorse Mr. Madden, Ms. Thomas said Mr. Madden also is "grasping at straws."

Ms. Thomas garnered about 64 percent of the district's vote in defeating Mr. Yeager, a three-term incumbent, in last month's Democratic primary.

Officials from the conservation league, a political committee made up of representatives from Maryland's leading environmental organizations, said they consider the District 13 race perhaps the most crucial to their causes statewide.

They said they could count on Mr. Madden to take a leadership role to protect the environment, but that Ms. Thomas, vice chairwoman of the House Environmental Matters Committee, too often has changed her vote between committee and the House floor, depending on political considerations.

Conservation league officials highlighted several instances in which they said Ms. Thomas voted against environmental interests in committee, then switched her position on the House floor, including measures limiting Chesapeake Bay oil spill liability and restricting local jurisdictions' authority to enact stringent pesticide laws.

"It's a problem when someone touts herself as such a good environmental leader, but you have to watch her all the time," said Dru Schmidt-Perkins, state director of Clean Water Action.

The officials complimented Mr. Madden for lobbying colleagues to oppose the pesticide bill, forcing a roll call vote on a wetlands initiative and attempting

to introduce a measure to eliminate Columbia's exemption from the state's forest conservation law.

Ms. Thomas contends that she has sponsored "significant" environmental legislation, including bills that encourage and increase composting, recycling and the use of alternative fuels. She countered that Mr. Madden has not been a leading sponsor of any successful environmental initiatives.

Ms. Thomas received scores of 90 and 100 from the conservation league based on her floor votes on environmental bills over the last two years; Mr. Madden received a grade of 100 each year.

Mr. Madden said the endorsement from Mr. Yeager, who has held the District 13 seat since 1983, makes his campaign a "little less uphill" in a district where registered Democrats outnumber Republicans by about 3-to-2.

"Some things are more important than party, and Tom knows what they are," said Mr. Madden, who has represented the Laurel, Savage and Elkridge areas since 1991.

Ms. Thomas, who has represented east Columbia for 12 years, dismissed Mr. Yeager's endorsement as largely inconsequential.

"I think the voters already spoke in terms of Tom Yeager," said Ms. Thomas. "I'm running against Madden. I would hope the important thing for voters would be Madden's record vs. mine. Clearly, my record is of a far more effective legislator than Madden."

Mr. Yeager said he is supporting Mr. Madden because of the Republican contender's strong record on the environment, his appreciation of the needs of small businesses, his opposition to tax increases and his integrity and straightforward approach.

"I'm concerned about District 13. I have a lot of loyal attachments to it," Mr. Yeager said. "Basically, Marty is the best candidate to continue to serve the district."

Mr. Madden said he believes he has "quiet support" from Democrats in the district.

Allan Kittleman, chairman of the Howard Republican Central Committee, said Mr. Yeager's endorsement demonstrates that Mr. Madden's appeal crosses party lines. "I think it shows that this race is very competitive," he said. "I think it definitely will help a lot with Democratic voters."

Carole Fisher, chairwoman of the Howard Democratic Central Committee, said she doesn't expect Mr. Yeager's endorsement to have much influence. Mr. Yeager and Mr. Madden are both viewed as conservative and have a common base of support, she said, adding, "I think people who would vote for Tom would vote for Marty Madden no matter who the opponent was."

The conservation league also endorsed Democrat James P. Mundy, a high school history and government teacher who is trying to unseat Republican Sen. Christopher J. McCabe in District 14.

GRAPHIC: PHOTO 1, Delegate Thomas once had environmentalists' support.; PHOTO 2, Delegate Madden also picked up backing of Senator Yeager.