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HEADLINE: McFadden to withdraw, support Cummings; 22 of 32 seeking to replace Mfume attend forum, Campaign 1996

BYLINE: William F. Zorzi Jr., SUN STAFF

BODY:

State Sen. Nathaniel J. McFadden, who heads the Eastside Democratic Organization (EDO), reportedly will withdraw today from the race for the 7th District congressional seat and support state Del. Elijah E. Cummings.

Mr. McFadden, who took part in a candidates forum just last night, will announce his intentions formally today at a news conference with Mr. Cummings, the House speaker pro tem from West Baltimore.

Reached at home late last night, Mr. Cummings confirmed that Mr. McFadden would take himself out of the race today and put the weight of the EDO behind him in the March 5 primary to succeed Rep. Kweisi Mfume.

"I always believed that there should be no split between the east and west side of Baltimore," he said. "There is no question in my mind that Senator McFadden believes, just as I do, that the next congressman must serve the entire 7th Congressional District."

Support from the EDO, which in the past two years has refound some of its former strength as a political organization, is the first major endorsement in the race. It means that Mr. Cummings, whose political base is in West Baltimore, can count on organized support on the Eastside and minimize the possibility of splitting the vote.

State Del. Clarence Davis, from Mr. McFadden's district, also is a candidate for Mr. Mfume's seat.

After the forum earlier in the evening, Mr. McFadden would not say whether he was dropping out of the race. "We're considering all our options," he told a reporter.

But the deal apparently had been struck.

Twenty-two candidates showed up at a two-hour forum -- the first public gathering of the primary season -- sponsored by Marylanders Organized for Responsibility and Equity (MORE).

The extraordinary size of the field made the gathering at the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of the Free and Accepted Masons of Maryland, on Eutaw Place, look more like a choir rehearsal than a political forum.

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But the candidates -- 28 Democrats and four Republicans filed -- sat patiently waiting their turns to deliver answers to three questions sent to them earlier, within the allotted three minutes.

Many of the hopefuls mentioned jobs and economic development as the biggest challenges for the next representative and generally agreed that the federal budget should be balanced -- but over a longer period of time than that being pressed by the GOP on Capitol Hill.

State Del. Kenneth C. Montague Jr., a Democratic legislator from Northeast Baltimore, offered a realistic assessment of the biggest challenge that will face the new congressman, saying it would be "to get something done."

State Sen. Delores G. Kelley, a Democrat whose district includes parts of Baltimore City and Baltimore County, echoed that theme, saying she believed the biggest challenge of the next representative would be "not to be irrelevant in a sea of Republicans."

Ms. Kelley said she would endeavor to "develop common ground and voting blocs" among the members of Congress to maximize her effectiveness.

Traci K. Miller, 28, an assistant state's attorney in Baltimore's Juvenile Courts Division who is on leave to run for office, offered herself as the example of "a new generation of new leadership."

Ms. Miller, echoing her announcement speech, said it was time to "raise our expectations."

The Rev. Frank M. Reid III, pastor of Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, did not attend last night's forum.

Charles G. Tildon Jr., retired president of the Community College of Baltimore and chairman of MORE, said Mr. Reid had accepted but was unable to attend because of a scheduling conflict.

The candidates running to succeed Mr. Mfume for a two-year term that begins in January 1997 have until tomorrow to withdraw.

A special primary -- with a separate filing deadline -- will be held to select a Democrat and a Republican to face off in a special general election for the right to complete the last 11 months of Mr. Mfume's current term.

GRAPHIC: PHOTO, CHIAKI KAWAJIRI : SUN STAFF, A crowded field : Each candidate was allotted three minutes to answer three questions.

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