

Delegate to Run for Curry's Job

Baker Faces Fundraising Challenge in Pr. George's Race

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Maryland Del. Rushern L. Baker III yesterday announced his candidacy for Prince George's county executive, saying his top priority is repairing the county's long-struggling public school system.

Baker launched his campaign to succeed County Executive Wayne K. Curry (D) 10 months before the Democratic primary, hoping to jump-start his fundraising machine to compete with rivals who have already amassed substantially larger war chests.

The delegate from Cheverly has a long way to go: With \$28,000 in the bank, he trails three contenders with accounts that have ballooned well beyond \$200,000. But Baker said he has time to recover. "We've just started raising money," he said.

Early on a rainy morning, Baker sought to dramatize his commitment to education by arriving in a yellow school bus at the Judith P. Hoyer Early Childhood Center in Cheverly. He was greeted by about a dozen supporters, the most enthusiastic of whom may have been his press spokesman, Ramon V. Korionoff, who repeatedly chanted, "That's right!" during the candidate's speech.

Baker, chairman of the Prince George's House delegation, said that the county is at a "crossroad" and that improving the schools is key to retaining residents and drawing new businesses. He touted his past efforts lobbying the state for education funding.

Baker, who drew 75 friends and supporters to a reception last night, is co-sponsoring bills that would change the way the county Board of Education is chosen—from an all-elected board to a mix of elected and appointed members.

Baker also touched on the police department's reputation for brutality, saying: "We need leadership that won't be deterred by the 'Blue Wall of Silence.'" Baker has been a moderate critic of the police, endorsing reform efforts while supporting Chief John S. Farrell.

Baker, 43, a lawyer, is the second candidate to formally announce a bid for county executive. Democrat Major F. Riddick, former chief of staff for Gov. Parris N. Glendening (D), announced his campaign in October and reported last month that he has \$269,000 in the bank.

State's Attorney Jack B. Johnson (D) and County Council member M.H. Jim Estep (D-Croom) have said they intend to run. Johnson has \$304,000, and Estep, \$233,000. The Rev. C. Anthony Muse, another Democratic contender, has \$161,000, while council member Ronald V. Russell (D-Mitchellville) has \$149,000 and council member Isaac J. Gourline (D-Fort Washington) has \$3,600.

Baker was under pressure to announce his candidacy before the start of next month's legislative session in Annapolis, during which lawmakers are barred from raising money for state offices. No such restriction applies to campaigns for local or federal offices.

Nevertheless, Baker faces a daunting challenge: trying to raise money when donors are focused on the gubernatorial race. "There are people who have gotten the jump on him, which puts him at a disad-

vantage," said U.S. Rep. Albert R. Wynn (D-Md.).

A number of Democrats have prodded Baker to run for a new state Senate seat that's likely to be carved out by the state redistricting commission. But Baker rejected the entreaties and has put his political future at risk aiming for the county's top seat.

His decision, along with the ungainly size of the field posturing to succeed Curry, may be evidence of a larger truth about the Prince George's political culture: the lack of a strong Democratic Party organization that taps candidates to run for particular offices.

A generation ago, county politics were dominated by the "Breakfast Club," a group of politicians and lawyers who hand-picked candidates. As a wave of African American politicians came into power, no organization has risen to take its place.

"There's no machine that says, 'You run for this office,'" said David Harrington, the mayor of Bladensburg, who is supporting Baker. "For the people running, that could make all the difference. You get a political base."

Baker said he is running for county executive because it is the one office from which he can influence issues that he cares about. "Our leadership is critical now," Baker said. "Our families . . . wonder why should they stay. They wonder if our schools system will ever provide the best education for their children."