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Name Recognition Eludes Md. Delegate

Baker Starts Over for Pr. George's Race

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Del. Rushern L. Baker III jogged briskly through the Laurel Independence Day parade, waving enthusiastically as though impervious to the wilting heat.

He looked purposeful, athletic, confident -- a strong contender in the race to become the next Prince George's county executive.

Yet the blank expressions in his wake told a more complicated story.

"Never heard of him," Laurel resident Judy Morris said moments after Baker pumped her hand.

A block down the parade route, police volunteer Jennifer Napora had a similar reaction: "He's the only candidate for county executive I don't already know about," she said.

Widely regarded in Annapolis as one of the General Assembly's rising stars, Baker turned down the rare chance to run for a new state Senate seat created especially for him in order to enter this campaign. But less than two months before the Sept. 10 primary, his campaign is struggling to overcome a challenge that normally plagues rookies: Many voters still have no idea who he is.

Although he led the fight to replace the county's controversial school board with an appointed panel this year, that burst of publicity has passed.

And whereas others in the field of five Democrats -- including the state's attorney, a preacher of a large church, a former top aide to the governor and a former fire chief-turned-County Council member -- can count on broad sources of grass-roots support, Baker, 43, is based in a small central county district.

If he can reach the voters, he has reason to hope they will like what they see. A genial two-term delegate who unified the county's historically fractious legislators as chairman of the Prince George's delegation. An effective lawmaker who helped win the county an unprecedented \$1 billion in state education funds over the next six years. A young, African American professional who has vowed to fix this majority black county's troubled schools, attract more businesses and reform a police force with a reputation for brutality.

"While my name recognition is not as high as we'd want it to be, once people know my record . . . [most] of them will vote for me," he said.

But getting the word out is no easy task in a county of more than 800,000.

As of this week, Baker said, he has raised about \$200,000 -- chump change compared with the war chests of such opponents as Major F. Riddick, Gov. Parris N. Glendening's former chief of staff, who has put his at \$600,000.

Unless he can attract more cash, the most efficient means of reaching voters -- television spots, radio ads, even road signs -- will be off-limits to Baker until the final stages of the race. And even his admirers warn that may be too late.

"He has vision, he has focus and he has passion about the right issues," said Del. Howard P. Rawlings (D-Baltimore), chairman of the House Appropriations Committee. "But without the ability to get his message out to the voters, he's going to lose."

Baker said he has had no second thoughts about running. "Prince George's is at a critical stage, and the county executive's office is where I can make the biggest difference," he said. "The fact that I could possibly lose was never a good excuse not to run."

Besides, he added, he can still win what remains an open race. Many residents are still undecided, he noted. "Once they start to look at the candidates they already know, they are going to want alternatives," he predicted. "Then they'll say 'Hey, who is this guy Baker?'"

Baker plans to tell them in a blitz of ads in the last weeks of the race. Until then, he is relying on occasional mailings and a grueling schedule of face-to-face campaigning.

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Most days find him on the street by dawn, hailing commuters at Metro stations and major intersections in a T-shirt emblazoned with a green apple, symbolizing his emphasis on education.

Then it's off to a neighborhood to knock on doors. Or to a civic group to give a speech. Or to a parade to march. Or to a supermarket to catch shoppers as the sun sets before heading home to Cheverly for a brief respite before starting again the next morning.

These efforts are mainly concentrated in the northern half of the county, since most of Baker's opponents have strongholds in the south. In addition to Riddick, the other candidates in the Democratic primary are State's Attorney Jack B. Johnson; County Council member M.H. Jim Estepp (Croom) and C. Anthony Muse, a pastor and former state delegate.

Baker's supporters insist that his retail politicking is bearing fruit. "Rushern wins as many votes as he shakes hands," said Kimberly Propeack, a lawyer with the immigrant rights group CASA de Maryland who is volunteering with the campaign. "To know him is to like him."

One advantage is his ability to relate to a wide swath of the county's diverse population. The only candidate who lives in the struggling inner Beltway, Baker is no stranger to the concerns of Prince George's less-fortunate residents.

Yet as a partner in a law firm and the only candidate with children in the school system, he is equally at ease with middle-class blacks and whites from more prosperous outside-the-Beltway communities. He has also gained support among Latinos, who laud him for pushing through legislation to translate important state documents into Spanish.

The man dubbed Mr. Congeniality by his Annapolis colleagues deftly weaves discussion of his positions with personal anecdotes that underscore his everyman appeal.

To a 52-year-old man at a Cheverly swimming pool who was concerned about rising crime, Baker recounted how his car was stolen from in front of his house recently. "It even had delegate tags on it!" he laughed. Then he smoothly segued into a promise to direct more resources to the police and strengthen citizen oversight.

To a teacher pushing a shopping cart into a Bowie supermarket, Baker described his dismay at the crumbling infrastructure of Suitland High School, which one of his three children attends. Then he launched into a pledge to fix the county's underperforming school system by reducing class sizes and improving teacher incentives.

The teacher, Katherine Klase, was impressed. "He's obviously very involved in the schools," she said. "I will definitely look into Mr. Baker."

Another shopper, Brian Curran, an air-conditioning repairman, expressed a similar sentiment, even though he strongly disagreed with Baker's efforts to dismantle the elected school board.

"Now we have no representation," Curran complained. "But I'll give [Baker] a fair look, because I don't want to be a single-issue person," he added.

Indeed, though dozens of protesters heckled Baker outside his office at the height of the school board controversy, his campaign does not appear to be suffering repercussions. The debate has even attracted some attention to his effort.

One of those who took notice was Katrice Howard, a teacher from Capitol Heights, whom Baker walked past as she tended a barbecue in a Bowie park July 4.

"Thank you," Howard gushed before Baker could even introduce himself. "We really needed that school board revamped." Asked later if he would get her vote, she answered, "Of course!"

But the encounter was a rarity: Whatever recognition the board fight earned Baker now appears to be fading.

"Annapolis is a very insular world," said Keith Haller, a Bethesda-based pollster. "While the political intelligentsia may be familiar with your successes, the typical voter is not going to know about your legislative record."

The extent to which that is the case was on display during a recent service Baker attended at Reid Temple AME Church in Lanham. For more than two hours, 500 parishioners roared back their approval to a succession of preachers.

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Many had tears in their eyes. A few even passed out in the aisles.

Then the Rev. Lee P. Washington asked Baker -- who had spoken at the church during the peak of the school board struggle -- to stand up and wave to the audience. He was met with puzzled, if polite, silence.

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