

# Profiles in politics

## Richard M. Dixon

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By TONI GUAGENTI  
Times Staff Writer

Carroll Co. T. ANNAPOLIS

When former state Sen. Charles Smelser suggested Richard Dixon trade his position on the local school board for a seat in the House of Delegates, Dixon was skeptical.

"Charlie, you've got to be out of your mind!" Dixon exclaimed, back in 1978.

Dixon wasn't sure a black man could win an elected office in Carroll, a county with a black population of consistently 4 percent or less.

That statistic's bearing on the election of a deserving man — regardless of his skin color — was hogwash in the eyes of Smelser.

"I knew he had to work hard and it wouldn't be easy, but I thought he could make it," recalled Smelser, who served 35 years in the House and Senate before retiring in 1994.

In hindsight, "make it" turned out to be an understatement.

Dixon is one of Carroll's most celebrated sons — a sixth-generation Carroll countian who rose from the halls of segregation to the halls of the State House and most recently to one of Maryland's five constitutional offices — state treasurer.

Dixon didn't taste political success in 1978. But that didn't stop him.

He mulled Smelser's suggestion, talking with many Carroll countians about his chances.

Some encouraged him.

Some discouraged him.

"I just didn't think it was possible," said Dixon recently.

Dixon recalled several friends "of the Caucasian persuasion" who warned him against a run.

"They thought they were doing me a favor," he said.

For every few who tried to save Dixon from a loss, many advised him to go for it.

One supporter was Westminster attorney William Dulany.

"I was one of the people who got him involved in politics in the beginning," said Dulany, because "he has energy; he's intelligent; he gets along well with people; he expresses himself freely."

His family's long history in Carroll and his parents — who were well-known and respected in the community — "certainly helped," said Sen. Larry Haines, R-Carroll.

"His parents [Mamie and Thomas Dixon] taught him their values and he carried through with them; that was recognized [by the voters]," said Smelser.

### Mr. Treasurer

Jazz music saunters through the spacious office while Maryland's 22nd state treasurer scans his agenda for the remainder of the day and the upcoming week:

A whirlwind trip to Baltimore to greet Charm City's newest National Football League owner, Art Modell.

A meeting of state treasurers from across the United States at the White House. The trip includes a powwow with President Clinton.

The treasurer's first multi-million-dollar bond sale.

"I've been in meetings all day," says Dixon in his office at the Goldstein Treasury Building in Annapolis.

He's not complaining.

Dixon's ecstatic about his new job, and it shows.

The always-dapper Democrat walks with a bounce and smiles and laughs ... a lot.

He's made the transition from a successful Merrill Lynch financial

consultant with a master's degree in business administration to the official who invests the money of Maryland and its taxpayers.

He's still in awe of his new lower-broking position, a job to which he was overwhelmingly elected in January by his General Assembly peers.

When workers erected his name, Richard N. Dixon, in big, gold letters in the foyer of his new office, he "sat down about five minutes and looked at it," the mustachioed Dixon says.

### That's politics

During his run for state treasurer, Dixon received heavy criticism from several members of the legislative Black Caucus and the Women's Caucus for not supporting their issues during his 13-year tenure as delegate.

Dixon even riled a few liberal Democrats when he voted for a tax increase during last year's session. He was the only Democrat to break ranks and join Republicans in the unsuccessful vote.

Some black legislators said they felt slapped in the face by Dixon's refusal to join the group. Despite the animosity, the caucus still endorsed him — narrowly. The women, on the other hand, endorsed a Prince George's County Democrat, Pauline Menes. The Baltimore chapter of the NAACP supported Menes, too.

But Dixon says that's politics. When it came down to it, he had the votes to become treasurer, Dixon reflects.

But politicians can have long memories.

Dixon still carries a rectangularly booklet in the inside of his jacket pocket. He used it to tally the number of legislators who said personally, to his face — they'd vote for him, or against him.

Dixon says that's how he successfully worked all those years in the legislature — behind the scenes.

He chaired two powerful joint subcommittees, served on the powerful Appropriations Committee, and in his final, full year as a delegate, he served as chairman of the Capital Budget Subcommittee. He held the power of approving or disapproving projects in the state's capital budget.

Dixon says that job was the best he's ever held.

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"Everyone was my friend," Dixon said during his swearing-in ceremony at Morgan State University, his alma mater, on Feb. 1.

As his mentor, Clarence Blount, D-Baltimore, used to say, Dixon recalls, "I'm inside cutting pie, not outside banging on the door."

### 'A careful person'

As a young, black man in Carroll County during the 1960s and 1970s, Dixon was involved in the community. Among other activities, he coached Jaycees Little League football and served for eight years on the Carroll County Board of Education, two of those years as president.

"In those days he was a quiet, lead-by-example minority," said Jackie Finch, a Westminster resident and Dixon's campaign treasurer for 18 years. "He was involved [but] he was not a civil rights activist in the sense of the word.

"He was a young man who cared and listened with a keen ear."

"He's grown up a careful person," said Dixon's sister, Trudy Green, of White Plains, N.Y. "He's always known which direction he was going in and set his mind to it and went that way."

Green and Dixon's sister, Edith Davenport, of New York City, attributed Dixon's determination to their parents, the late Mamie and Thomas Dixon.

"Although our family and a lot of the other families were living through [segregation], we had such a sense of pride," said Green. "We didn't let it keep us down; we had some sense of self worth."

### The first time

In 1978, on the steps of the Robert Moton School in Westminster, political novice Dixon announced his candidacy. The scene had significance for Dixon: he graduated from the then-segregated school in 1956.

"He doesn't like to forget his roots and all the things that shaped him," said Green.

Dixon lost that first race, though.

Some say it could have been because of the color of his skin, but others say it was a tough election.

Dixon ran against two incumbents.

"Not a whole lot of people win the first election they run for,"

said Smelser, a conservative Democrat who represented Carroll and Frederick counties. "The first time I ran, I wasn't supposed to win."

Dixon ran a close race with fellow Democrat John Willis, who currently serves as Maryland's secretary of state, another constitutional office. That showed he was a credible candidate, Dixon said.

### Another try

Dixon filed to run for a House of Delegates seat the night before the deadline in 1982.

Finch received the call. Would she remain Dixon's treasurer?

"I was surprised," recalled Finch, "but I said 'Of course I would.'"

More Carroll countians contributed to the race, and he had decent name recognition from his family's presence and from serving on the school board.

"It was a small county and he had been on school board awhile," said Greg Pecoraro, a local Democratic party official. "People knew something about him [and] his conservative political philosophy [garnered] significant Republican support."

It also didn't hurt that redistricting based on the 1980 census had created a new seat in a new district. The two incumbents he had run against in 1978 no longer were seeking those seats.

"I thought I could win," he surmised after looking at the new district.

And he did.

Dixon won three more times and worked hard on each campaign — all of which, he said, were devoid of racism. And each time he had the support of his wife, Grayson, his soft-spoken partner for 36 years.

Dixon had that "window of opportunity to get" into office, said Pecoraro, now a Westminster councilman. "Richard became an institution; incumbency has always been a strong thing in Carroll County."

### 'Closet Republican'?

Criticism of Dixon neither starts nor ends in Annapolis.

People also criticize him back home for not being more involved in black issues as a successful black man.

Cheryl Crandall, a special education teacher who lives near

Westminster, says Dixon has distanced himself from anything black in the county.

"No one is telling him to jump off a roof because you see a whole bunch of other African Americans jumping off a roof. If we don't stand together there will be no progress made," Crandall says. "We need to support each other, we need to network."

Crandall says she's had several dealings with Dixon as a delegate. She was disappointed with his stance after each encounter.

After that, she decided to investigate his voting record and, she says, concluded that Dixon is a "closet Republican."

"There's a point where you have to follow your own values ... of what's right and wrong, what's truth and what's justice," says Crandall.

"Human beings should have a plan for themselves ... at the same time, [though] I don't think you should sell your soul to get to that point."

Dixon should have joined the Black Caucus, but that doesn't mean he had to support every one of its issues, she says.

Dixon defends his conservative stance and voting record.

"I don't fit any mold," Dixon says. "I'm not what people want me to be."

Blacks are "not a monolithic group," he says. "That's very narrow thinking."

As Dixon had to do on several occasions in his quest for the treasurer's spot last month, he defends his votes.

"I voted my constituency," reiterates Dixon. "People didn't elect me to vote my conscience."

"Probably Richard's greatest strength [is that he's] always been able to see more than one side of an issue," says Dean Minnich, a former newspaper man who covered Dixon during some of his school board days.

"I never found it necessary or desirable to put any kind of label on Richard Dixon except that he worked on common sense; he defies labeling; he's had the respect of people from all walks of life," Minnich says.

Despite Crandall's assessment of Dixon, she says he deserved the treasurer's job.

"As much as I disagree with Richard Dixon's policies and the avenues he has chosen to travel to

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pursue his political career, he was qualified for the job," Crandall says. "That's the bottom line."

### **No match for success**

Democrats have been unable to match Dixon's success. Dixon was the only Democrat to hold elective office in the county after the 1994 election.

Once Dixon won, he built his own base, "he created his image [and] people liked him and voted for him," local Democratic official Pecoraro says.

Others believe Dixon's unyielding loyalty to his Carroll constituents kept him in office. "He represented accurately the overall political demeanor of the political being of Carroll County," says Minnich.

"Richard was elected from Carroll County because there's nothing racist about him, and he refused to be a racist," Minnich says. His election also "points out there may not be as much racism here as people would like to think."

"It's because he actually served the county very well," says former campaign treasurer Finch. "The county found him very electable; he has a good sense of humor [and] his ability to get along with people has served him well."

Dixon "doesn't bring a lot of baggage with him," Finch says.

"He doesn't fight old battles over; he finds his way through the fracas of politics using his very fine assets of negotiation ...[and] political savvy.

"It has been a very unlikely thing that has happened in Carroll County," Finch says. "It shows the people here have very good sense."

"It showed that people in Carroll County are fair, and if you have a good man, regardless of minority, they'll vote for him," says Smelser.

### **'What's right and fair'**

Dixon says there weren't many times his votes in Annapolis went against his conservative beliefs.

Others who know him say the same thing.

"They were his beliefs also," said Elizabeth Hooper, a longtime family friend.

Dixon has "never ignored the black community at home," Hooper said. "He's always been concerned with everything that

has been going on in Carroll County."

Dixon's spoken to students in Carroll's schools and at Carroll County Historical Society events about his black heritage.

Finch points to Dixon's recent contributions to many Carroll causes, such as rape crisis intervention, Carroll Community College, the Westminster Volunteer Fire Company and Carroll County's child care center. The money came from leftover campaign funds.

He also donated \$5,000 to a scholarship fund he set up many years ago in his mother's name at Morgan State.

He's been president of the Former Students of Robert Moton School Inc. for nearly 24 years, since its inception.

He and other Moton alumni, including Hooper, founded the organization that now awards five \$1,000 scholarships to blacks at each of Carroll's five high schools.

The group also holds an annual dinner fund-raiser and the annual Martin Luther King Jr. breakfast to be held this year on Feb. 24.

"Dixon's an individual," said Dulany. "He's not carrying a cause; he does what he thinks is right and fair."

### **Higher ground?**

Dixon says he couldn't have accomplished what he did if it wasn't for the United States of America, and "the Lord has been with me on this journey."

"I'm proud of this country," says Dixon. "I'm an American."

Blacks "bring a history with us, as does everyone else who has come to America," says Dixon's sister, Green. But we can't let that history "overwhelm us from being Americans" and participating in what this land has to offer.

What America could offer Dixon next is a shot at a higher elected office.

"[It] wouldn't be out of the question for him to seek a higher position," says Smelser. "Richard has the ability and the personality [to do so]."

Some say comptroller or governor.

Hooper says higher.

"He might be president of the United States someday."