

The Sun

**Judges' race leaves legacy of rivalry
Republicans split
blacks renew fight for judicial seat
GOP unity breakfast set
Campaign squabbles may have set stage for 1998 contests**

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One of the nastiest campaigns in Howard County history has finally ended, but the legacy of Tuesday's judicial election -- perhaps as bitter and passionate as the race itself -- is just beginning to take shape.

The county's Republican Party is facing deep fractures for the first time. Its State House delegation is re-examining the wisdom of judicial elections. And its African-American community is renewing its fight for a spot on Howard's judiciary, soon to be all white again.

Donna Hill Staton, Howard County's first black judge, lost her seat on the Circuit Court in a tight, three-way finish a year after Gov. Parris N. Glendening appointed her and Diane O. Leasure to the court. Leasure and District Judge Lenore R. Gelfman -- one of two challengers -- beat Hill Staton for 15-year seats on the Circuit Court.

Though all three top finishers were Democrats, a strange mix of politics put prominent Republicans in visible, powerful roles on both campaigns.

When the campaign turned sharply negative in recent weeks, Republicans who for years had sharpened their tongues on Democrats were suddenly stinging each other -- opening a rift that party leaders hope to begin healing at a unity breakfast Tuesday.

It is a new challenge for the Republicans, who, in the span of a decade, went from virtual powerlessness to control of the county in 1994, when they won a majority on the County Council and re-elected a Republican county executive.

"Success breeds itself into squabbling," said Council Chairman Darrel E. Drown, an Ellicott City Republican, two weeks before the election. "It's the natural progression."

Publicly, party leaders are already talking a good game on unity, putting the past behind them. But two of the sharpest rivals in the campaign -- Del. Robert L. Flanagan on the challengers' side and Councilman Dennis R. Schrader on the sitting judges' side -- are preparing to battle in 1998's Republican primary for county executive.

At least three other prominent Republicans may campaign for that office as well.

To add to the mix, County Executive Charles I. Ecker -- who stayed out of the judges' race -- is considering a run for governor against Ellen R. Sauerbrey, an ally of Flanagan and Del. Robert H. Kittleman, the grandfather of Howard's Republican party.

Party leaders hope Tuesday's breakfast will restore unity, at least until the next election. "This is our No. 1 challenge," Kittleman said.

But one county Republican Party activist, noting the battle wounds from the judges' race, privately predicted that the frictions will only end with a shake-up in the party's inner circle: "I think they'll heal by {some} people being on the outside."

The 1998 election year could also prove decisive for Howard's African-American community.

The electorate's rejection of the county's first black judge has raised the red flag for some regarding an African-American's chances of being elected to a countywide position, said the Rev. A. F. Turner, head of the county's African-American Coalition.

No African-American has been elected countywide since 1982 when Councilman C. Vernon Gray first won his seat and William Manning won his bid for the school board. Gray, a District 2 Democrat, has talked of running for county executive in two years.

The coalition -- an umbrella group of about 50 black organizations -- has scheduled a countywide town meeting in January to discuss race and politics in Howard, Turner said.

"We're channeling our anger and frustration into doing something constructive for the next election. We don't want the same consequence in 1998," he said. "We have to look at the issues negatively impacting African-American candidates, such as racism."

In the meantime, Turner said, the group will turn its attention to advocating that Glendening appoint an African-American to at least one of two vacancies on the county's District Court left by a retiring judge and Gelfman's elevation to Circuit Court.

"We're going to keep that issue before Governor Glendening and ask for a commitment that he will do all he can so an African-American will hold one of the seats," Turner said.

A local judicial nominating commission has forwarded a list of seven applicants -- including five white men and two women, one of whom is black -- for the first vacancy to Glendening.

The coalition quickly followed with a letter of its own opposing the list, saying it was not reflective of the diversity of the applicants. Of 16 applicants, six were white men, five of whom were recommended to the governor.

Some Howard state delegates and senators also have embraced the concept of diversifying the district bench. Early last month, Howard's three state senators recommended four applicants to Glendening from the judicial nominating commission's list -- three white men and an African-American woman.

"I imagine everybody in this community would like to see an African-American sitting on the bench," said Del. Frank S. Turner, an east Columbia Democrat. "Since it won't be on the Circuit Court, it must be on the District Court."

The yearlong, fractious Circuit Court campaign also has led some members of Howard's state delegation to question the value of contested judicial elections.

"I always believed that judges should not have to run for public office in the same way as a legislator or county councilman," said Howard's Republican Sen. Christopher J. McCabe. "The Howard County election might accelerate interest in redesigning judicial elections, but I don't think the delegation has to make it our priority."

Some senators and delegates said they will consider a recent recommendation from a state commission to eliminate contested elections for Maryland's circuit judges.

After public hearings, the commission's final recommendations will be presented as part of a larger report on court reforms to the governor and General Assembly leaders by Dec. 15.

"If I had to vote on it in the next five minutes, I'd vote for getting rid of contested elections," said Del. Elizabeth Bobo, a Democrat representing west Columbia and parts of Ellicott City.

On a personal level, the judicial race will help shape the future of some of Howard's most prominent political figures, including Schrader, Flanagan, Gray and Republican consultant Carol Arscott.

* Schrader: When he joined the County Council in 1994 representing the North Laurel area, he declared, "During the campaign, I worked with coalitions that transcended party lines, and I expect to do the same thing on the council."

True to his word, he has emerged as a centrist, a swing vote on several key issues on a County Council split 3-2 in favor of Republicans. He has also angered some party loyalists, who consider him too liberal.

His vigorous support for the sitting judges, appointed by Glendening, lost him points with that faction, particularly when he helped organize a news conference criticizing literature from the challengers' campaign as racist.

Those tactics may help him among moderates in a general election campaign for county executive in 1998. But he would first

have to win a Republican primary, and they are typically dominated by the type of party loyalists he has angered in the judges' race.

* Flanagan: He has the opposite problem. His credentials within the party are secure. Many consider him a hero for championing the cause of the judicial challengers -- and attacking Glendening at every opportunity.

But his voice in the campaign was often a strident one. And though Flanagan considers all publicity good publicity, many voters were angered by the negative tone of the judges' race.

If voters associate him with that, it could hurt him as a candidate for county executive -- maybe not in a primary election, where Republicans loyalists know him well, but in a general election, where he would need support from a broader pool of voters.

Either way, though, Flanagan's participation has strengthened his claim as a party leader.

His biggest problem at the moment is Councilman Drown -- a friend and ally also considering a run for county executive. Flanagan has told associates he would skip the race rather than run against Drown. He has no compunction about taking on Schrader.

* Gray: Before the judicial primary, Gray was a major force in advocating Hill Staton's appointment. After becoming a -- political, if not racial -- target of the challengers, he quietly excused himself from the forefront of the race.

The racial overtones in Tuesday's vote -- in which Hill Staton trailed her white running mate outside Columbia -- may not bode well for a countywide Gray candidacy.

But many of his Democratic colleagues say Hill Staton's defeat will not prove a political liability for Gray. In fact, it may even galvanize support for him within the county's African-American community, among other groups.

Two years from now, Gray's name recognition and his 14-year career on County Council will speak for him -- both positively and negatively -- more than the judicial race, his colleagues said. But most attention will be paid to whether his record carries well outside Columbia.

* Arscott: A Republican insider and paid political consultant who has served the GOP on a local and state level, Arscott had never worked for Democratic clients. Because the judicial race was nominally nonpartisan, she said her stint for the Democratic sitting judges was acceptable.

Time will tell if her rationale will fly within the party. Privately, some Republicans are harboring bruised feelings over what they see as Arscott's temporary defection, even as many publicly declare their admiration for her.

For now, all Arscott is saying is that she will not work on another judicial race in Howard. And many in the GOP suspect she will be embraced soon enough by Republicans -- if not immediately.

After all, there's the coming session of the state legislature, where she is a valued aide to House minority leader Kittleman, and the political wars leading to 1998, in which she is likely to be a major player.

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Caption:
PHOTO 1
PHOTO 2
PHOTO 3
PHOTO 4

Caption: Carol Arscott: GOP political consultant worked for the Democrats in the judicial race. C. Vernon Gray: Councilman was one of the last African-Americans elected countywide, in 1982. Robert Flanagan: Delegate is expected to run in Republican primary for county executive. Dennis Schrader: County councilman who supported sitting judges has emerged as a centrist.

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