

The Sun

**Post-election summit will consider the future of black candidates
Circuit Court contest led to effort to ponder race and politics**

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Does an African-American have a fair chance of being elected to political office in Howard County?

Despite Howard's longtime reputation of being a progressive and relatively harmonious place when it comes to racial matters, the results of last month's Circuit Court race indicate otherwise, some local African-American leaders say.

So they're holding a post-election summit Saturday at Columbia's Wilde Lake Interfaith Center to sort through why the county's first African-American judge lost her seat and the implications of that for future black candidates in Howard.

"There is a groundswell of concern about the future of black candidates," said Sherman Howell, a leader of the county's African American Coalition, an umbrella group of about 50 black organizations that is sponsoring the event. "I don't know when the dialogue and disappointment will end.

"Ideally, we want to look forward to 1998," Howell said, "but we can't move on until we deal with this."

The summit will feature a panel discussion about race and politics on a local, statewide and national level, he said.

Open to the public but closed to the media, the panel will feature Carl O. Snowden, an African-American city councilman in Annapolis who likely will run for mayor next year; Brad Coker, a nationally known pollster based in Columbia; and Cheryl Miller, a political science professor, among others.

Said Dennis R. Schrader, who supported Donna Hill Staton, the African-American who was not elected Circuit judge after being appointed by Gov. Parris N. Glendening last year: "Postmortems are always pretty standard procedures. This is a time of reflection."

According to some black political and community leaders, the thrust of that reflection so far is that racism was the primary factor leading to Donna Hill Staton's ouster from the Circuit Court.

In the wake of the vote last month, a Sun analysis of poll results showed that Hill Staton trailed her running mate -- Judge Diane O. Leasure, who also was appointed by Glendening -- by about 2 percentage points everywhere in the county but in Columbia. Leasure was elected.

Columbia has an African-American population of about 20 percent and prides itself on racial tolerance. Overall, the county is about 12 percent African-American.

Leasure and Hill Staton led the voting in Columbia, a Democratic bastion responsible for 41 percent of the votes. Their opponents, Judge Lenore R. Gelfman and Jonathan Scott Smith, prevailed in the more conservative parts of the county: Ellicott City, Elkridge and western Howard.

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

Gray is still on the council, but Howard has changed to councilmanic districts, so he now represents an east Columbia

district, not the entire county. Manning lost his seat on the school board in a countywide election in 1988.

Another black candidate, Delroy L. Cornick, president of the county's African American Republican Club, lost in bids for school board seats in 1992 and 1994. Ethel Hill, mother of Donna Hill Staton, also lost school board bids in 1978 and 1980.

In the recent judicial race, Hill Staton "was made to appear as an unattractive candidate because her opponents largely used divisive campaign tactics," said Cheryl Miller, associate professor of policy and political science at the University of Maryland Baltimore County. "A black candidate can't be elected countywide if her race is being used as a negative."

But not everyone agrees that race was a primary factor in her defeat. State Del. Frank S. Turner, a Democrat, said voting patterns, name recognition and campaigning styles were also major factors.

"It's necessary to move on," Turner said. "It's only two years away to the next election. It's time to get focused."

Countered Snowden: "To prepare for 1998, we have to look at what happened in 1996 or we are doomed to making the same mistakes."

The summit represents another aggressive effort by the coalition to advance African-American concerns since the election.

Since the vote, the group has urged Glendening to 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.

Also, the group filed complaints with two federal agencies about divisive campaign practices by Hill Staton and Leasure's challengers.

Besides distributing literature with what coalition members considered to be racial overtones, coalition members said, WJZ-TV unfairly helped promote the challengers' message by renting equipment and services to the campaign so it could make cable television commercials. Dick Gelfman, Judge Gelfman's husband, is a consumer affairs reporter at WJZ.

Howell said the coalition has not received a response from the two agencies, the Federal Communications Commission and the U.S. Department of Justice's Community Relation Service. However, a spokesman for the FCC has said that it does not appear the TV station's involvement in the political campaign was inappropriate.

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