

The Sun

**Schrader examines executive prospects
Councilman builds campaign
consultant to study possibilities**

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March 20, 1997 Page(s): 1B
Edition: HOWARD SUN
Section: METRO
Length: 1031 words
Index Terms:
Howard County

Record Number: BSUN503170

Armed with an engineer's mind and a politician's drive, Howard County Council Chairman Dennis R. Schrader is building a campaign for county executive brick by logical brick.

Schrader still speaks with the obligatory coyness of politicians keeping their options open. But the North Laurel Republican, 44, has hired Howard's top political consultant, former county GOP Chairwoman Carol Arscott, to study his prospects. And he has set aside \$20,000 to pay her.

For the moment at least, that puts him ahead of a crowded field of Republicans who want to succeed County Executive Charles I. Ecker. Even if his nascent run for governor flops, Ecker by law must step down after his second term expires in 1998.

Schrader -- a former Democrat, like Ecker -- has emerged from the fastest-growing area of the county, North Laurel, to become leader of the centrist faction of Howard's Republicans.

It's a precarious spot. He is less conservative and newer to the public eye than most of Howard's GOP leaders, including at least four other politicians strongly considering a run for county executive in 1998.

"I think he's done a good job where he is, and it would be nice if he'd stay there," said Circuit Court Clerk Margaret D. Rappaport, among the conservatives considering a run for county executive. "But that's entirely up to him."

Another potential problem is his political philosophy. He is more technocrat than visionary. He resists labels and shies from the sweeping public pronouncements common to campaigns in the media age.

"When you have a quality airplane, you expect it to fly and arrive on time," Schrader told more than 200 supporters at a fundraiser for him Tuesday at a Savage Mill ballroom. "And that's the way county government ought to be."

That's about as high as his rhetoric soars.

But his friends in the GOP see Schrader's penchant for planning, ability to raise money and credentials as an administrator. As vice president for facilities, management and development for the University of Maryland Medical Center, he has overseen a \$300 million building program.

In the foyer of the medical center's giant new Gudelsky Building, Schrader seems at home sipping almond cappuccino -- one of the yuppie accouterments in the thriving downtown Baltimore hospital he helped rebuild.

"My view of the world is that I'm not truly a politician," he says. "I'm an engineer who does good for the community. When I die, I want to leave a legacy that I've done something good for people."

For a self-proclaimed nonpolitician, Schrader has worked hard to build his political base in a fast-changing area. He has about \$30,000 in his campaign bank account -- enough to run again for his council seat and a head start toward the \$300,000 he estimates a run for executive would cost.

Schrader also has worked hard to win over African-Americans. He was one of the few top Republicans to fight for Donna Hill Staton, Howard's first black judge, who lost an election in November.

His backers say that if they can get Schrader through a Republican primary, they love his chances against any Democrat.

"It's management, leadership coalition-building," says Joan Athen, another former GOP chairwoman. "That's what we need for county executive."

Schrader is the son of Democratic activists in Buffalo, N.Y. He went to General Motors Institute, an engineering school, but later joined the Navy instead of climbing the ladder at GM.

When he left active duty in 1986 -- he still is an officer in the Naval Reserve -- Schrader landed a top administrative job at the medical center, where he has worked since.

He soon went into local Republican politics, running unsuccessfully for the County Council in 1990 and then coming back with a victory in 1994.

That was an important election for Howard Republicans. Schrader gave the GOP a 3-2 majority on the council, capping a decade in which they went from virtual oblivion to near-domination.

Yet he is not completely trusted by the conservative, establishment wing of Howard's Republican Party.

The conservatives point to his support for Hill Staton and Judge Diane O. Leasure -- two appointees of Democratic Gov. Parris N. Glendening -- in last year's judges' race. They talk of Schrader's occasional breaks from the Republican majority on County Council votes.

And on a more personal note, they whisper how his wife, Sandy Schrader -- a member of Howard's Republican Central Committee and a force in the party -- was once president of the teachers' union, a favorite Republican punching bag, in Buffalo.

"She was young," Schrader replies with a shrug.

But he bristles at the suggestion that he fails some kind of conservative litmus test.

"I've spent 17 years serving my country," he says. "I've managed lots and lots of money. I think the term conservative is a name that doesn't mean anything."

His prospective GOP opponents would disagree. Councilman Charles C. Feaga of West Friendship, state Del. Robert L. Flanagan of Ellicott City, Margaret Rappaport and her husband -- 1994 lieutenant governor nominee Paul H. Rappaport -- all call themselves conservatives.

If the 1998 Republican primary pits Schrader against any of those four, party leaders worry that Republicans will split along the ideological fault line revealed by last year's judges' race.

But if more than one conservative runs, Schrader's political base could emerge as the strongest and most unified.

For now, Schrader deflects those questions. He talks about focus groups and polls. About how much money he must raise and by when. About the contingencies, the upsides, the downsides and the consequences "downstream."

"I think I have a pretty good chance," he says, "but I'm going to have the data to prove that."

Pub Date: 3/20/97

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