

The Sun

**Hill Staton chosen as Curran deputy  
Ex-Circuit judge to be first black woman in post**

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Spurned by voters in last fall's divisive Howard County Circuit Court general election, Donna Hill Staton will return to the public legal sector -- this time as a deputy attorney general for Maryland.

Attorney General J. Joseph Curran Jr. will announce today his appointment of Hill Staton to be one of his two deputies, he said yesterday. The other is Carmen Shepherd.

Hill Staton will be the first black woman to serve in that position when she starts in April. Her predecessor and the first African-American in the position, Norman E. Parker Jr., left in December to work for a private law firm.

As Howard County's first black judge, Hill Staton lost her seat in a four-way race a year after Gov. Parris N. Glendening appointed her and Diane O. Leasure to the court. Leasure was elected, but Howard County District Judge Lenore R. Gelfman -- one of two challengers -- beat Hill Staton.

In her new job, Hill Staton will oversee the office's work in advising state agencies on transactions and business matters, including bond issues and real estate and economic development matters, Curran said. She will also handle some litigation and help train attorneys on staff.

"Once the vacancy opened up, it became very obvious to me that {Hill Staton} is such a rare legal talent that someone like that would be very valuable to our office," said Curran, who offered the position to Hill Staton last month.

"I'm sure she could get more financial rewards elsewhere," he said.

The deputy attorney general position pays about \$82,000 a year. A Howard County Circuit Court judge makes \$93,500, a significant pay cut from what Hill Staton was making as a partner and civil attorney with Piper and Marbury in Baltimore, one of the premiere law firms in the state.

"This is a different experience in public service, but it will be equally challenging as being on the Circuit Court," Hill Staton, 39, said yesterday.

"With this new opportunity I'll have a strong impact on the lives of citizens across the state," she said. "It's a very positive step forward."

Last year's Circuit Court campaign is widely considered the most fractious election in county history, and the nastiest judicial election in the state. The race began with name-calling and character assassinations -- and quickly escalated into accusations of unfair campaign practices and racism.

From the beginning, the two challengers in the race -- Gelfman and her losing running mate, Jonathan Scott Smith -- said that Glendening emphasized the quest for diversity on the bench above qualifications in appointing Leasure and Hill Staton.

State Del. Robert L. Flanagan, a Howard Republican, who served as a spokesman for the challengers, said that assertion still stands in regard to Hill Staton sitting on the bench but not as a deputy attorney general.

"There are a lot of good lawyers out there, but not all of them should be appointed to the Circuit Court bench," Flanagan said. "I would not question her qualifications to be a very good deputy attorney general."

"I'm very pleased that she has gotten a position where she could use her legal skills," he said.

In the campaign's aftermath, there has been a call for judicial election reform from some county and state political leaders. Within the county's black community, the implications of Hill Staton's loss for the future of black candidates in Howard is being debated.

"History is what it is. I served well, to the best of my ability, but the numbers didn't come in as I hoped," Hill Staton said. "But that is the past. I can accept what happened."

Howard Circuit Judge Dennis M. Sweeney, who served as a deputy attorney general for seven years before he was appointed to the bench, said his former colleague will have "the best legal job in the state."

"She'll have the responsibility and authority of the attorney general without having to worry about the politics," Sweeney said.

Hill Staton said she had a "universe of job offers" from private law firms, the public sector and corporations, but declined to make a decision until the first of this year.

She said she even considered applying for the two recent Howard District Court vacancies created by one judge's retirement and Gelfman's ascension to Hill Staton's seat.

"There was never a time when I didn't have many things to consider," she said. "I never had to solicit anything."

Hill Staton graduated from Princeton University, and earned a law degree from George Washington University. During summer internships and after law school, she clerked for two federal judges. She has served on the state bar association's board.

"This will round out an already pretty diverse legal career. I couldn't be happier," Hill Staton said. "The beauty of a position like this is I'll be working in an exciting office. And it leaves open other options that do not preclude returning to the judiciary."

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Caption:  
PHOTO

Caption: Donna Hill Staton: To be deputy state attorney general.

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