

The Sun

Unity pledge was a bad idea

Howard County: Republicans offended party members in seeking unprecedented vow.

April 23, 1998 Page(s): 18A

Edition: HOWARD

Section: EDITORIAL

Length: 361 words

Article Type: EDITORIAL

Record Number: BSUN04230222

WHAT'S THE old saying about closing the barn door after the animals have already gotten out? The ill-fated unity pledge sought by the Howard County Republican Executive Committee was a reminder of that homily. It was a poor attempt to stop what became fashionable locally in 1996, supporting candidates who don't share your party affiliation.

Blame it on an election that year, which should have been nonpartisan -- the county Circuit Court judges' race. Instead of having candidates run on their merit as jurists, Maryland prefers to have the objectivity of its circuit judges questioned by their having to beg for money as well as votes.

Supporting the incumbent circuit judges that year meant voting for Democrats Donna Hill Staton and Diane O. Leasure. But the ticket opposing them included Republican Jonathan Scott Smith and Democrat Lenore R. Gelfman.

Ms. Gelfman won with the very visible and vocal support of prominent Republicans such as Del. Robert L. Flanagan and former police chief Paul H. Rappaport. But veteran Republican strategist Carol A. Arscott was hired to help the Hill/Leasure campaign.

This year's primary for county executive between Republican County Council members Dennis R. Schrader and Charles C. Feaga may also cleave the party.

Democratic front-runner and former police chief James Robey could get support from his Republican friends as a result.

To keep that from happening, the party executive committee proposed a unity pledge. But leading party members killed the idea.

One was County Executive Charles I. Ecker, who is mounting a challenge within the GOP for its gubernatorial nomination. Mr. Rappaport promised only to "support those people who support Republican principles."

It's good to see the rank-and-file refuse to walk in lock step. Instead of party allegiance, candidates will have to distinguish how they differ on issues to carry the day.

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