

The Sun

For Judges Hill Staton and Leasure

Howard County: After successful trials, Circuit Court judges have earned full terms.

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THIS NEWSPAPER has a long-standing policy of endorsing sitting judges in contested elections. This policy stems from our opposition to the concept of elected judgeships, which inappropriately inject politics into a system of choosing impartial arbiters of the law. We continue to recommend an appointed merit system for Circuit Courts.

Even if we did not have this policy, however, we would endorse Howard County Circuit Judges Donna Hill Staton and Diane O. Leasure. They have performed admirably since being appointed to the bench last year by Gov. Parris N. Glendening. The court's first two female jurists have disproved their challengers' claims that they would be judges "on training wheels." Quite the contrary. They have demonstrated competency, diligence and fairness and have worked to reduce a backlog of court cases, impressing even some of their toughest critics.

Judges Leasure and Hill Staton came to the bench after careers in complex civil litigation. Their experience has complemented the strong criminal backgrounds of their three colleagues.

Judge Leasure was an educator before turning to law, then became a lawyer and partner at a prominent Prince George's County law firm, where she was the lead litigator in major cases. Ivy League-trained Judge Hill Staton clerked for a federal judge in Baltimore and later became a partner at one of Baltimore's most prestigious law firms.

Both women were nominated last year by a judicial nominating commission. Also recommended were their challengers, District Judge Lenore Gelfman and attorney Jonathan Scott Smith. The challengers fired the first blows in an ugly campaign that has embarrassed Howard County and was cited by a state commission on courts last month as a good reason to abandon elected judgeships.

Judge Gelfman had earned a solid reputation in the legal community for her work in District Court, but her reaction to not being appointed appears to be a case of sour grapes. Mr. Smith, a skilled attorney, has shown with his "training wheels" swipe and similar remarks that his talents are better suited as an advocate before the bench than as a judge behind it.

Howard County now has a fine judiciary, and Judges Hill Staton and Leasure deserve full 15-year terms.

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