

The Sun

**Judges race most costly on record  
\$462,748 was spent, finance reports show  
old high was \$289,160  
'Rich people only'  
Hard-fought campaign for two Circuit Court positions lasted a year, CAMPAIGN 1996**

by Craig Timberg SUN STAFF The Baltimore Sun

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The battle for two seats on Howard County's Circuit Court -- widely considered the nastiest election in county history -- also was its most expensive, costing \$462,748 over the course of a yearlong struggle.

Campaign finance reports released this week also show that in the final two weeks, each of the four candidates lent their campaigns \$20,000 for cable television and direct mail advertising -- a fact that illustrates the importance of personal wealth in close elections.

"Rich people only, please apply," said Lin Eagan, campaign chairwoman for Judges Diane O. Leasure and Donna Hill Staton. "We couldn't have run the campaign without the candidates digging into their pockets the way they did."

Many political observers also say the election was the most expensive court race in Maryland history. Among county races, the previous record for the most expensive election belonged to the 1994 re-election of County Executive Charles I. Ecker, on which Ecker and challenger Susan B. Gray spent \$289,160.

The campaign finance reports also give fresh details about how WJZ-TV reporter Dick Gelfman used a home studio and his station's video equipment to craft campaign ads for his wife, District Judge Lenore R. Gelfman.

She was one of the winners Nov. 5 and is to be sworn into office Monday.

This new finance report shows a \$2,133 payment to WJZ-TV for rental of video equipment. Although campaign officials denied problems with their earlier report Oct. 25, they amended it to show \$2,325 of in-kind contributions from Dick Gelfman and others who helped produce the campaign ads.

All together, the campaign for Gelfman and her running mate, Ellicott City attorney Jonathan Scott Smith, spent \$206,597 on the March primary and the November general election.

More than half that money, \$115,028, came from loans split evenly by Smith and Gelfman, including \$40,000 chipped in for the last-minute advertisements.

The campaign for Leasure -- the other winner of the election -- and running mate Hill Staton spent \$252,632.

They split loans totaling \$105,606. Hill Staton's portion was more than half of what she earned in her year as Howard's first African-American judge. The job pays \$93,500 a year.

For all four candidates, raising money to repay campaign loans will be difficult.

Candidates typically have trouble raising money after an election. "I don't think there's any chance of getting that back," said Del.

Robert H. Kittleman, a West Friendship Republican and House Minority Leader. "I doubt if they'll even try."

Neither campaign has immediate plans for retiring the debt to their candidates, but officials from both campaigns say new fund-raisers are possible.

Throughout the election, Leasure and Hill Staton had far more success getting contributions, particularly from people outside Howard County. They raised \$144,670 from donations and events. Gelfman and Smith raised \$71,987.

But the difference was hard to see in the closing weeks of the election, when the campaigns spent similar amounts on mail and cable television ads.

Gelfman and Smith were able to maintain parity by relying exclusively on volunteers to staff their campaign, design mailings and craft television ads.

"I think that's extraordinary," said campaign chairwoman Deborah E. Dwyer. "A lot of people gave their time."

Among the key volunteers was Dick Gelfman, a consumer affairs reporter on WJZ-TV.

Using a home studio and equipment he rented from his station, Gelfman led a group of volunteers who crafted the campaign's four highly polished cable television ads, including a stinging attack on Gov. Parris N. Glendening, who appointed Leasure and Hill Staton last year.

The campaign finance report due Oct. 25, two weeks before the election, reflected none of Gelfman's work — neither the donation of his basement studio nor his rental of WJZ-TV equipment.

However, after inquiries by The Sun, campaign officials promised more detail in the post-election finance report.

The new report lists the \$2,133 of WJZ equipment that Gelfman said he first used in September.

The campaign also filed an amended version of its Oct. 25 report listing in-kind contributions of \$1,150 from Gelfman for the use of his video expertise and home video equipment.

Frank Lubber, a radio talk show host on WCBM and Smith's father-in-law, also is listed as contributing \$600 worth of voice-over work on the ads.

Between the two reports, the campaign lists \$4,458 spent on production of its four ads.

"I wish I could have had them at those rates," said Eagan, chairwoman of the rival campaign. "I think the basic difference would be that we had to hire our media consultant, and they were married to theirs."

She said the campaign for Leasure and Hill Staton paid \$4,000 for each ad produced by Mason-Dixon Campaign Polling & Strategy of Annapolis.

The campaign paid Mason-Dixon \$123,000 to provide polling, strategy, cable television ads and mailings.

Company officials have refused to say how much was a fee and how much went for such expenses as television time and postage.

A fifth candidate, Pikesville attorney Jay Fred Cohen, spent \$3,519 on his campaign before losing in the primary.

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