

The Sun

**Flanagan relishes role in campaign
Delegate backs challengers in judicial contest
Political battle joined
Republican links sitting judges to Glendening**

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In his 10 years as one of Howard County's leading Republicans, Robert L. Flanagan has built a reputation for always finding his way to the fight -- for being pugnacious, partisan and publicity-hungry even compared to other politicians.

It has been no surprise to many that Flanagan has emerged as the most visible -- and acid-tongued -- of the Republicans backing the challengers in Howard County's Circuit Court race, which more resembles a street fight than the genteel judges' races of the past.

But this judicial race offers more than just the joy of battle for Flanagan, a lawyer and Republican state delegate representing Ellicott City and western Howard since 1987.

It gives him an ideal podium for attacking Gov. Parris N. Glendening, archrival of Republican Ellen R. Sauerbrey, a close Flanagan ally. And it gives him the local name recognition to fuel a possible run for county executive in 1998.

Says Flanagan, a former All-New England offensive guard at Harvard, "Politics is a competitive sport, just like football, and at times can be a contact sport as well."

Though a battler, Flanagan also has developed a reputation as a likable sort of combatant, someone who can fight all day on the State House floor and then go out to dinner with his rivals.

"Basically, he's a very nice person. He's just way off the wall politically," says Del. Frank S. Turner, an east Columbia Democrat. "Every year, you'll see Bob, he'll be in the middle of a new controversy. He has not learned to pick and choose what issues he should take on."

Flanagan's ability to endear himself even to political enemies may come from his rearing in a highly political family. His father was an aide to a U.S. senator from Vermont, then later worked in the Eisenhower administration. Politics was the native tongue of the Flanagan home.

Flanagan's brother, Vermont State Auditor Ed Flanagan, is a liberal Democrat who calls himself the nation's only openly gay statewide elected official. He too has built a reputation for stirring controversy, particularly at the expense of the governor -- in his case, Vermont's.

"I don't sidestep a fight if it's justified, that's for sure," Ed Flanagan says. "It's in the genes, I guess."

The judges' race pits Diane O. Leasure and Donna Hill Staton -- whom Glendening appointed last fall -- against two challengers, District Judge Lenore R. Gelfman and attorney Jonathan Scott Smith.

Flanagan largely missed round one of that battle -- a bitter primary election in March that eliminated only one of the five candidates for the two judgeships -- because the General Assembly was in session.

When Flanagan returned his attention to local politics, many of Howard's top Republicans had distanced themselves from the

race. Smith was the only Republican left, and many party officials wanted to avoid a feud that had become messy and dirty.

Not Flanagan. As the general election has heated up, Flanagan has become the challengers' campaign's top spinner, feeding information to the press, attacking Leasure and Hill Staton -- whom he calls "the Glendening judges" -- at every chance.

He particularly worked hard to publicize news of Leasure's role in planning a \$17,000 fund-raiser for Glendening days before her appointment.

The governor "cares only about power, and money is a tool for acquiring and holding power," Flanagan says. "I am as much motivated to expose Governor Glendening for what he really is as I am to support people who I believe are the best candidates for judge."

Flanagan's strategy is to tie Leasure and Hill Staton to Glendening's sagging popularity. If Leasure and Hill Staton lose, Sauerbrey, Flanagan and other Republicans will portray it as a public rebuke of the governor.

"If his appointees are rejected, it's something of a rejection of him," Sauerbrey says of the judges' race.

The race also holds some danger for Flanagan, particularly as it grows nastier in its closing days with accusations that his candidates had distributed racist literature -- a charge that Flanagan and the campaign have vigorously disputed.

"It gives him some higher visibility, but I don't think, on the whole, it's a winner for him," said Jim Kraft, president of Columbia Democratic Club.

"I think he's painting himself as the bad guy in a situation in which he doesn't need to be a bad guy," he said.

Lin Eagan, campaign chairwoman for the sitting judges, said of Flanagan and the challengers, "They're all just part of one big cacophony of bitterness. The campaign just seems to howl all at once."

The race is supposed to be nonpartisan, but support has developed along party lines.

On issues, Flanagan is a conservative. In past years, he has battled Glendening's attempts to expand an affirmative action program and opposed the governor's deals for new stadiums for both the Washington Redskins and the Baltimore Ravens.

But Flanagan is more liberal than most Republicans on some social issues: He supports abortion rights and favors some gay rights.

Neither would likely be major issues if Flanagan were to run for county executive in 1998 -- he puts the odds of his running at 50-50 -- because such races typically turn on local issues, such as growth, taxes, crime and education.

Incumbent County Executive Charles I. Ecker, a Republican, is barred from running again.

Three other party conservatives also are looking seriously at entering the race for executive -- County Council Chairman Darrel E. Drown, Councilman Charles C. Feaga and Circuit Court Clerk Margaret D. Rappaport.

Those three and Flanagan have met in hopes of heading off conflict and eventually joining forces against moderate Councilman Dennis R. Schrader, a north Laurel Republican who is supporting the sitting judges and also seriously considering running for county executive.

Flanagan won't say that the 1996 judge's race is a warm-up for the 1998 county executive's race. But he notes, "Any time you take a sound position and you pursue it in public, I think it helps you."

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Caption:
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Caption: Del. Robert L. Flanagan: Finds his way to the fight.

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