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Closure for Donna Hill Staton

Howard's first black judge: Job with attorney general lets her continue in public sector.

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A SWEET ENDING to a bitter chapter in Howard County's legal and political history occurred this month when former Judge Donna Hill Staton was appointed to a high-level post in the Maryland attorney general's office. Although critical issues about the county's judiciary remain unresolved, questions surrounding Ms. Hill Staton's future have been answered.

Ms. Hill Staton, the first African American judge in Howard before being defeated at the polls last fall, becomes one of Attorney General J. Joseph Curran's two deputies. Her year on the bench demonstrated why citizens are fortunate to have her continue in the public sector.

Her new job should have enough challenges to test her legal mettle, minus the political nonsense she encountered after being selected for the Circuit Court in 1995. This time last year, Ms. Hill Staton and her running mate, Judge Diane O. Leasure, were reeling from propaganda attacks on their competence and character. Male judges in the county, even with a controversial verdict or two under their belts, don't endure the fierce challenges these two did.

Through it all, both women maintained their dignity. After Ms. Hill Staton lost her bid to retain her seat in the election, she was disappointed but displayed class and grace.

She says she entertained "a universe of job offers" from private firms and considered applying for the two recent vacancies on Howard's District Court, one of which has not been filled. She instead accepted a job that probably pays less than many other options, about \$82,000 a year. She earned more as a partner at the prestigious Baltimore law firm of Piper & Marbury, where she worked before her appointment to the bench.

In her new job, Ms. Hill Staton will advise state agencies, perform some litigation work and help train staff attorneys. The job also broadens her options for the future, which could include a return to the judiciary. Among those who have served as deputy attorneys general are Howard Circuit Judge Dennis M. Sweeney and U.S. Attorney Lynne A. Battaglia.

Her year on the circuit bench should serve her well as a deputy attorney general. She will use her legal skills to work for the citizens of Howard County and Maryland, albeit without the robe.

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