

The Sun

**Incumbent judges lead fund raising
\$360,000 collected in Circuit Court race may be state record
Latest report just released
Money needs create 'awkward position,' court official says
CAMPAIGN 1996**

by Caitlin Francke and Howard Libit SUN STAFF The Baltimore Sun

October 29, 1996 Page(s): 1B
Edition: HOWARD SUN
Section: METRO
Length: 922 words
Index Terms:
Howard County

Record Number: BSUN478795

Howard County's contentious judicial race may be setting state records for fund-raising -- with the two camps having collected more than \$360,000 since the campaign began late last year.

In the past eight months, Circuit Judges Diane O. Leasure and Donna Hill Staton have raised almost 40 percent more than their opponents, District Judge Lenore R. Gelfman and local attorney Jonathan Scott Smith, according to the latest campaign finance reports filed Friday with the state.

The reports show that the sitting judges have drawn many large contributions from out-of-county law firms and friends. By contrast, the challengers have very few large donors other than relatives.

Between Feb. 18 and Oct. 20 -- the latest reporting period -- Leasure and Hill Staton raised more than \$130,000, bringing their campaign total to more than \$201,000.

In the same period, Gelfman and Smith raised more than \$78,000, bringing their campaign total to about \$162,000.

The state elections board could not confirm yesterday whether the sums raised by the campaigns were the largest for a Circuit Court race in the state, but political observers believe they are.

"It would surprise me if this was not the highest," said Albert Winchester, staff director for the Commission on the Future of Maryland Courts.

The fund-raising has led to concerns in the state and local legal communities about the appearance of impropriety that the donations -- particularly from lawyers who may come before the judges -- create.

"The need to raise campaign funds puts them {judges} in a very awkward position," said George Riggan, state court administrator at the Administrative Office of the Courts. "These are the same people who must appear before them on a day-to-day basis."

In part, this criticism has prompted a state committee to make a draft proposal to replace contested judicial elections with a retention election, in which voters would approve or reject a judge with no competitors.

The four Howard candidates have invested heavily in their campaigns since the primary.

Since February, Leasure and Hill Staton each gave more than \$25,000 in loans and almost \$1,000 each in donations to their campaigns. Altogether, the pair has lent more than \$63,000 to their campaign since its start.

Gelfman and Smith have lent more than \$18,000 each in the last eight months, bringing their total loans to \$72,000. Gelfman also has donated \$2,000 worth of office space for the campaign's use of a building she and her husband own on Route 108.

In the past eight months, the biggest difference in the two tickets' fund-raising was in a huge gap that in contributions and ticket purchases for campaign events.

The sitting judges raised more than \$77,000 from contributions and tickets during this time.

That was more than three times as much as the challengers collected from contributions and tickets.

A big source of donations for the challengers' campaign was an August fund-raising auction, to which dozens of donors gave more than \$8,000 in in-kind contributions.

Since the beginning of the sitting judges' campaign, at least 19 law firms, individuals or companies have given \$1,000 or more.

Among their largest contributors were \$2,700 from the Baltimore law firm Kramon and Graham; \$2,000 from J. P. Foods, a Columbia food broker; \$2,000 from First Municipal Credit Group in Columbia; and \$2,000 from the Baltimore law firm of Schochor, Federico and Staton -- the law firm of Hill Staton's husband.

By contrast, the challengers have received \$1,000 or more from six donors -- and some of those large donations were gifts for the auction. Their largest donors include Gelfman's husband, television personality Dick Gelfman; Smith's mother, Eloise Rand; Ellicott City attorney John Willis; and Frank Turban, the campaign treasurer's husband.

The Gelfman-Smith camp says the difference in fund-raising cuts to the difference between the two campaigns.

"If you take a look at their campaign, they are primarily out of county people," said Deborah Dwyer, Gelfman-Smith campaign chairwoman.

Lin Eagan, chairwoman of the sitting judges campaign, said the election has attracted statewide interest, prompting the out-of-county donations.

The finance reports said the challengers had more than \$15,000 remaining to spend during the final two weeks of the campaign and the sitting judges had \$6,100 left.

However, the sitting judges likely will receive a new infusion of cash from a fund-raising event held Friday in Baltimore.

The sitting judges have spent more than \$78,000 with the Mason-Dixon consulting firm in the past eight months, according to their report. But most of that money was used by the firm to purchase printing, cable television time and other services, said Carol Arscott, consultant for the campaign. She would not disclose Mason-Dixon's fee.

The challengers spent \$5,500 hiring campaign staff, mostly in the primary. They have chosen to go with a volunteer staff in the General Election.

Pub Date: 10/29/96

Copyright 1996 The Baltimore Sun Company