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Either Feaga or Robey will do for some voters
Comment

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I HAVE it on good authority that a sprinkling of known Republicans showed up at a recent fund-raiser for Democratic Howard County executive candidate James N. Robey. It's not surprising.

You may remember that Mr. Robey made an appearance at a fund-raiser in March for Republican county executive candidate Charles C. Feaga.

Mr. Robey has no primary opposition. Mr. Feaga is trying to survive a Republican primary fight against fellow County Council member Dennis R. Schrader.

If Mr. Feaga succeeds, both he and Mr. Robey expect to do some fishing from the same pool of voters who may ignore party labels in the November general election.

Many of these voters are Republicans. What attracts them to both Mr. Feaga and Mr. Robey has very little to do with politics. It has to do with these men's roots in Howard County.

Mixed feelings

That's important to people who have watched the great migration of new residents from the cities with mixed feelings.

Mr. Robey, 57, grew up in the Daniels community north of downtown Ellicott City. He graduated from Howard High School and joined the police force in 1966, when the department had its headquarters in what is now Roger Carter Recreation Center.

He advanced through the ranks, getting to know just about everybody who was anybody in the county. He was appointed chief in 1991 by County Executive Charles I. Ecker, the Republican whom Mr. Robey now seeks to succeed.

Mr. Feaga, who has been endorsed by Mr. Ecker, knows everybody that Mr. Robey knows. He was born on the family farm in 1932. He graduated from Ellicott City High School and took over the farm at age 17 when his father died of a stroke.

Mr. Feaga ran for County Council in 1970 and 1982 before finally winning in 1986. Friends and neighbors have depended on him over the years to represent the simple small-town values that epitomized life in Howard County before it became so suburban.

Those values have changed somewhat as suburbanization has increased.

As it became tougher and tougher to make a living off the land, many farm families decided to sell out to developers. They no longer fear development as a threat to their livelihoods because they no longer farm.

Mr. Feaga, whose own family has sold land to developers, wants Howard County to retain some of the rural qualities he grew up with. But he's not opposed to more development. It brings in revenue for the county and provides an alternative for farmers who can't make money raising a crop.

Mr. Schrader has been more outspoken about managing future growth to make sure infrastructure is in place to support it. He even voted against the planned Columbia-style Rouse Co. development in North Laurel.

Based largely on their different positions in the North Laurel debate, some people are trying to attach an "anti-growth" label on Mr.

Schrader, while describing Mr. Feaga as "pro-growth."

That's too simplistic. Talking to either reveals the two aren't that far apart on how they would like to see the county grow.

They disagree more on the garbage tax issue. Mr. Schrader wants to remove the \$125-per-household fee that was imposed in 1996 at Mr. Ecker's direction. Mr. Feaga says the county can't afford to lose the \$8 million a year that the fee provides.

But their positions on the garbage tax are unlikely to be the deciding factor for every voter in the GOP primary.

Some people will vote for Mr. Feaga because they see him as one of their own, a real Howard countian. For these voters, Mr. Schrader, 44, a native of Buffalo, N.Y., is a foreigner even though he's lived here since the mid-1980s.

Mr. Schrader ran for the council in 1990 but didn't win until the 1994 election. Some voters don't think he's seasoned enough to be county executive. There are Republicans who feel Mr. Feaga is owed the job because he's been on the council so long.

Other Republicans think Mr. Schrader's conservative credentials are suspect because he supported incumbent Democrats Donna Hill Staton and Diane O. Leasure in their 1996 judicial races. Ms. Staton, the first African-American appointed to the Howard County Circuit Court, lost her seat to Lenore R. Gelfman.

Check the record

Mr. Robey doesn't have a record on issues such as growth and development or the trash tax. He does have a record as police chief that voters should review.

Many will remember the botched seven-month investigation of massage parlors in which officers allowed themselves to be touched sexually. Others will recall his insensitive remarks that questioned a rape victim's story.

But these incidents have to be weighed against the improvements Mr. Robey made to turn the Howard County police force into the professional unit it is today.

There is much for voters to consider. But many have already made up their minds. They think Mr. Feaga and Mr. Robey are from the same mold.

Harold Jackson writes editorials about Howard County for The Sun.

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