

The Sun

**Exhibit A against elected judgeships**

**Circuit Court: From flood of donations to nasty ads, Howard race has been a disgrace.**

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HOWARD COUNTY'S judicial race has become obscene. Anyone requiring proof of this need only review recently filed campaign finance reports for the four candidates, who together raised more than \$360,000 for the primary and general elections. That may be a Maryland record for a judge's race. The purpose of this money was to win two seats on the Howard Circuit Court bench, but it may be the final piece of evidence needed to seal the case against contested judicial elections.

A commission studying the future of Maryland's courts has used this bitter race as an example of why contested judicial elections should be abolished. Circuit courts are the only tier of the Maryland judiciary that employ such a method of selecting or retaining judges.

The race pits sitting Circuit Judges Diane O. Leasure and Donna Hill Staton against District Judge Lenore R. Gelfman and attorney Jonathan Scott Smith. From comments that the incumbents were "judges on training wheels" to outlandish cable television commercials and mailings, the vitriol has embarrassed Howard County and demeaned the reputation of its bench.

Even worse than the rhetoric is the money. Both sides raised and spent exorbitant amounts. The public has reason to worry when the top contributors are lawyers, many of whom will appear before the victorious candidates in court. This will have implications beyond Tuesday's election.

The courts are supposed to be unbiased arbiters of the law. But the torrent of money from lawyers cannot but help feed speculation that attorneys will be rewarded or punished, depending on which camp they supported.

Can a lawyer get a fair shake from a judge he vigorously opposed in the campaign? Can a judge who knows the lawyer supported her opponent remain objective? Perhaps all sides will remain professional, but each ruling against former adversaries will raise questions.

We already have too much cynicism over executive and legislative branches of government. This race has done nothing but hurt the local judiciary's image and could be duplicated elsewhere. If this is the future of contested judicial elections, this method of choosing judges does not deserve a future.

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