

Schaefer Weighs Run In Baltimore

Ex-Mayor May Try To Reclaim Old Job

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Barely a month into his new job as Maryland comptroller, William Donald Schaefer is gathering with close advisers tonight to consider a run for Baltimore mayor.

Schaefer, a mercurial figure who retired after 15 years as Baltimore mayor and eight years as governor but then parachuted back into politics last year with a run for comptroller, refused to discuss his plans yesterday, calling his dinner with advisers a "secret meeting."

"I have not said yes; I have not said anything," said Schaefer, who will make plans for an April fund-raiser and talk about the mayor's race while he and his supporters dine at Dalesio's in Baltimore's Little Italy. "Everyone has a fund-raiser. That doesn't mean anything. I might run for president."

But in the same breath, the 77-year-old Democrat was sounding very much like a candidate.

"I'm very worried over the city, over continued deterioration," he said, adding that he is afraid his accomplishments as mayor are starting to fade against persistent crime, poverty and drug problems.

"You really need someone who understands this city," Schaefer said. "I understand the little things are important. Potholes, lights, people, getting communities to work together. You need someone who understands the business community. Someone who cares. Now's the time. The city is right on the edge of either a giant leap forward or a slip back."

Although he said he enjoys being comptroller, the state's chief tax collector and a member of the powerful Board of Public Works, which approves all major state contracts, Schaefer said the mayor's office continues to be his idea of heaven. "No question about it, the best job I ever had was being mayor," he said.

Schaefer's public toying with the idea of running for mayor comes amid plenty of jockeying in Baltimore to determine the successor to Kurt L. Schmoke (D), who is

leaving office when his third term expires at the end of this year.

Almost a dozen people are considering a bid for office, but none is considered a dominant political figure. One possible candidate who is well known, Kweisi Mfume, says he isn't interested in the post despite persistent attempts to draw him into the race.

Key legislators in Annapolis are pushing legislation that would enable Mfume, a former congressman who is now head of the NAACP, to run by reducing the city's residency requirement for mayoral candidates from one year to six months.

Mfume lives in Baltimore County and under current law would be ineligible to run.

Schaefer calls Mfume "brilliant" and said he would support him if he ran for mayor. "He's the ideal man for the job," Schaefer said. "He could do the healing of the black and white that the city needs. But I don't think he's going to do it. I don't see Mfume running."

That's why Schaefer is weighing a run, according to a source close to the comptroller and a veteran of several Schaefer campaigns. "He thinks Baltimore needs him. He thinks he can stop the fleeing to the counties and build the city back up," the source said.

Others in Schaefer's inner circle are skeptical.

"The city is not easy to run. It's the same as when he was mayor," said John Paterakis, a Baltimore bakery baron and one of Schaefer's chief fund-raisers. "Could he win? He probably could win, but it would not be as easy as some think. The African Americans may not be willing to give up a seat they've waited for so long."

In the Democratic primary for

advisers uncomfortable.

"You look at those primary results, and you know it would be a racial fight," one adviser said. "I don't think he's going to put himself in that race unless he knows he can win."

And there's the age factor.

"The man is 77 years old," said Matthew Crenson, a Johns Hopkins University political science professor. "By the time, he finished his first term, he would be 82. He was a very vigorous mayor. Whether he still has the stamina to do that is still an open question."

Term limits forced Schaefer from public service in 1995 after 40 years in politics. But when Comptroller Louis L. Goldstein, a friend of his, unexpectedly died in office last July at age 85, Schaefer stunned observers by jumping into the race.

A lifelong bachelor, Schaefer has essentially been married to the public all his life. He does, however, have a longtime friend, Hilda Mae Snoops, who has been ill. She attended his inauguration last month but seldom appears at public events. When he decided to run for comptroller last summer, Schaefer said, she gave her blessing.

Many close associates say it's too early to gauge whether Schaefer will actually run. He has until July to file papers, but most agree that serious fund-raising must be underway by April.

Some are adamant that he's serious about running, but one political ally in Annapolis said he thought Schaefer was merely seeking attention.

Staff writer Daniel LeDuc contributed to this report.

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comptroller last year, Schaefer barely carried Baltimore and fought off a surprisingly strong challenge by Joan M. Pratt, the city's comptroller, who is African American and who plans to run for mayor. Schaefer won 32,598 votes in the city to Pratt's 30,893—a margin that makes some Schaefer