

Blount runs in the city's interest

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By BARRY RASCOVAR

FOR state Sen. Clarence Blount, Independence Day came and went without any special fanfare. He celebrated the Fourth of July just as he has done for the past 28 years, and as he probably will be doing for the next four years — as the most powerful black state senator representing Baltimore.

This past week, the 77-year-old Mr. Blount decided, over the strong protests of his wife, to run for re-election.

He didn't really want to serve another term. His friends and family had been begging him to declare his independence from the legislative grind and enjoy the retirement he richly deserves.

Mr. Blount agreed initially. He hadn't formed a re-election campaign committee or made any moves toward seeking another term. He was looking forward to lots of leisure time.

But then duty called once again. He looked around and wasn't impressed with the heirs apparent eager to file for his seat. His political allies implored him to stick around for another term. Nearly two dozen community groups asked him to stay. The state Senate president made it clear how much he wanted Mr. Blount to remain.

What seemed to tip the balance, though, was Clarence Blount's deep and abiding concern for the well-being of Baltimore. He could prove the linchpin for the city's chances of surviving the next legislative redistricting.

Not only is Mr. Blount the elder statesman — by far — of the Maryland Legislative Black Caucus, but also he is the most powerful black senator — by far. He chairs a major standing committee (Economic and Environmental Affairs) and has been Senate majority leader for the past 16 years.

That kind of legislative power can't be replaced. For the city to lose Clarence Blount would be a

major blow. His voice will be desperately needed by the city when the time comes to redraw legislative boundaries after the 2000 census — especially if Republican Ellen Sauerbrey is governor.

When Mr. Blount first stepped foot in the Senate in 1971, he was one of 12 Baltimore lawmakers. Now there are eight, and four of these senators have districts split between city and county. In the next realignment, Baltimore's numbers could shrink to six, with only two purely city senators.

That could severely weaken Baltimore's position in the legislature, especially on budget matters. Add the prospect of losing such an influential veteran as Mr. Blount, and Baltimore could suffer major political damage.

Any replacement for Mr. Blount would be a lost cause for Baltimore in Annapolis because he or she would wield virtually no muscle as a freshman senator. "I know the system inside and out," Mr. Blount said last week. "I won't bounce around like a rubber ball." His successor would.

His commitment is palpable. His integrity and humility make him a beloved figure in the State House. He's not going to let his colleagues down, or his community. He won't disappoint his city.

Public service has been Clarence Blount's life — as a teacher and longtime city school principal, as head of the city's Community Action Agency for two decades and as a state senator.

It has been a remarkable story, from the tobacco fields of Beaufort County, N.C., to the streets of segregated Baltimore. At age 10, he couldn't read or write. He graduated from high school at age 21, from college at 28, received his master's degree at 44 and turned to politics at 49.

Frequently, he has been mentioned as a candidate for Congress or for mayor. But he has resisted. "I know my limitations," he said in an interview 13 years ago. He lacks burning political ambition.

He understands his strength as a conciliator. When political or community tempers flare, it is usually the calming remarks of Mr. Blount that restore order.

"Baltimore has been very good to me," he recalled, in that long-ago interview. He would never jeopardize the city's well-being — even if it means, at age 77, delaying his retirement for a few more years.

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