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Judge Coolahan may run for county executive post

By Larry Carson
Sun Staff Writer

Although his retirement as a District Court judge won't be official until May 9, former state Sen. John C. Coolahan has been telling friends he intends to run for Baltimore County executive.

If the "Lion of Halethorpe" enters the race, he would become the fourth major Democratic candidate, joining state Sen. Nancy L. Murphy of Catonsville and County Council members Charles A. Dutch Ruppertsberger III of Timonium and Melvin G. Mintz of Pikesville. Only Senator Murphy, appointed to fill Judge Coolahan's Senate seat in 1989, has announced his candidacy publicly.

Judge Coolahan's entry into the field also would put two well-known candidates into the race from the southwest — himself and Mrs. Murphy. A similar situation occurred in 1978 during Judge Coolahan's first race for county executive, when he and another Westside Democrat split the area vote in the primary, and Donald L. Hutchinson won and became executive.

Republican incumbent Roger B. Hayden has one primary opponent — Donald Brewer, a laid-off county employee.

Because judges are prohibited by the Maryland Court of Appeals from being active in politics while on the bench, Judge Coolahan would not confirm his intentions. But he has submitted his retirement letter and said he is aware of the rumor that he will run.

"I'll do nothing to dispel that rumor," he said. "I'll be glad to talk to you on May 10."

Judge Coolahan, 61, made his intentions clear Feb. 28 in Annapolis, where he attended a reunion for former members

and staff of the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee, several senators said. He submitted his retirement letter the same day, effective five years to the day from when he was sworn in as a judge.

Sen. Julian L. Lapidus, a Baltimore Democrat who attended the reunion, said Judge Coolahan told senators he is "contemplating" running for county executive, but made no public statement.

Sen. Norman R. Stone Jr. of Dundalk, who saw his former colleague outside the reunion, said Judge Coolahan "kind of inferred" he would be running.

In 1978, Judge Coolahan split his potential home-base support with another Murphy. John V. Murphy, then a county councilman from Catonsville, got 21,499 votes to 25,894 for then-Senator Coolahan. Mr. Hutchinson, of Essex, won the seven-way Democratic primary with 29,431 votes and coasted to an easy general election victory.

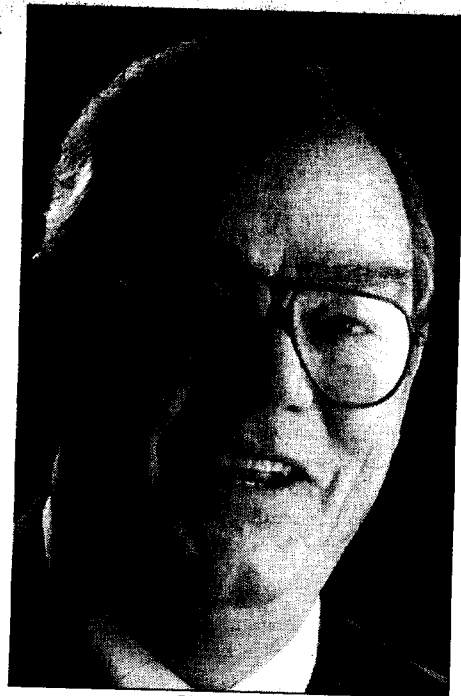
Senator Murphy said she is in the race to stay and that once Judge Coolahan jumps in, he may change his mind about running.

"It's a different time and a different race," she said. "When he gets out and about, he might change his mind."

The effect of a Coolahan candidacy on the rest of the Democratic field is unclear.

Sen. Thomas L. Bromwell of Fullerton and Senator Stone said Eastside Democratic officials will try to unite behind a candidate but are not sure who. No Eastside Democrat is running for executive.

If Mr. Coolahan's rough-hewn persona catches on in the eastern part of the county, he could win, they said. His outspoken, colorful style earned Judge Coolahan, a Marine sergeant during the Korean War,



BARBARA HADDOCK/SUN STAFF PHOTO

John C. Coolahan to retire as judge.

the "Lion of Halethorpe" title during his 17 years in the General Assembly.

If he fails to win on the east side, some observers feel he will further fracture the vote and perhaps indirectly aid Councilman Mintz.

Mr. Mintz's strategy is to get overwhelming support in his heavy-voting Pikesville-Randallstown district and respectable totals elsewhere.

That strategy failed in the 1978 executive's race, when then Delegate Howard Needle received only about 8,000 votes outside his home turf and finished third with 23,663 votes.

Mr. Ruppertsberger would not comment on the impact of a possible Coolahan candidacy.