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HEADLINE: Activists hope voters pick Shore's 1st black legislator; 2 African-Americans, 1 white in Democratic race in District 37A; Mirrors 1994 election

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BODY:

SALISBURY -- Thwarted four years ago in a bid to elect the Eastern Shore's first African-American state legislator, activists and politicians are vowing that history will not repeat itself in Tuesday's primary vote.

Still, the last-minute entry of a white challenger to two prominent black candidates in the peninsula's only majority-black legislative district is familiar.

In the 1994 general election, the delegate's seat from District 37A slipped away from a pair of African-American hopefuls in favor of a white candidate.

Former Wicomico County Commissioner Rudolph C. Cane lost that election by 20 votes to Don B. Hughes, a white Republican who is not seeking a second term.

The third candidate in that race, former Dorchester County Commissioner Lemuel D. Chester II, who is black, received nearly 1,300 votes while running as an independent -- compared to Cane's 2,771.

The district, which includes parts of Dorchester and Wicomico counties, was drawn under a 1994 order of a panel of federal judges after civil rights activists filed a lawsuit challenging the way district lines had been drawn by the General Assembly.

This time, Cane is opposed in the Democratic primary by a second black candidate, Cambridge City Councilwoman Octavene Saunders, and a white newcomer, Troy A. Johnson, a Wicomico County corrections officer who filed for the office Aug. 6.

Johnson's father, Samuel Q. Johnson III, served three terms in the House of Delegates from the old District 37 before failing in a 1994 state Senate bid.

Cane, a retired State Highway Administration official who says he never really stopped running for the seat after

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his narrow defeat, insists he has worked hard to overcome any shortcomings of the 1994 campaign, which was decided by absentee ballots.

"We're working to get out the vote, to get absentee ballots in the hands of people who need them, to get the polls covered and people out on the street on Tuesday," Cane said. "Everything that was a problem last time, we're working that much harder."

Shore political observers believe organization and voter turnout will be the key elements in this year's race, especially in the primary.

"Primaries are, as a rule, low-turnout elections," said Harry Basehart, chairman of the political science department at Salisbury State University. "Anytime a bloc splits its vote, you open the door, but I would think that black voters in that district are aware of what happened, and they don't want a repeat."

64 percent Democrats

Sixty percent of the district's 32,758 residents are African-Americans, making it the only majority-black district in the state, besides Prince George's County and Baltimore. More than 64 percent of the district's nearly 18,000 voters are Democrats.

"There is simply no excuse for voters in that district not to make history," said Carl O. Snowden, a civil rights activist and former Annapolis alderman who was involved in many voting-rights lawsuits brought during the last decade on the Shore.

"I'm betting that African-American voters are more sophisticated this time around," Snowden said. "This would be a tremendous step forward for the Eastern Shore."

Saunders, a two-term Cambridge councilwoman who turned down repeated entreaties to step aside in favor of Cane, has little patience for talk of vote splitting.

"I am so sick of hearing about black candidates -- I never look at it as a color issue," Saunders said. "I look at this as an opportunity to continue the work I've done in Cambridge in Annapolis. It's a race for an office, it's qualifications, it's who God and the voters decide to put there."

Even with Saunders in the race, Cane supporters believe their candidate is stronger than in 1994. Saunders, they say, has a solid base of support in her Cambridge ward but is little-known in much of the district, particularly in Wicomico, where almost 70 percent of registered voters live.

For his part, Johnson dismisses charges he entered the race as a spoiler, citing his deep political and family ties in the area.

The Bivalve resident acknowledges he waited until the incumbent Hughes announced he would not seek another term before entering the race.

'The right time'

"I've grown up with a strong desire for public service, and this has been my home all my life," Johnson said. "There is no incumbent; there are multiple candidates. It's the right time and the right place."

Johnson, whose mother, Rebecca Taylor-White, is a Republican candidate for an at-large seat on the Wicomico County Council, says criticism of Saunders -- or of Chester in 1994 -- is unfair to both.

"Ms. Octavene Saunders has been involved in Cambridge politics for years, and to say she'll pull votes from

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somebody else doesn't give her any credit," Johnson said. "Lemuel Chester had a base of support and people voted for him. To say anything else is demeaning to his accomplishments."

No matter who wins Tuesday's primary, district voters will still have a chance to elect the first African-American candidate in the fall. Jacqueline B. Jones, who worked the last four years as a legislative aide to Hughes, is running unopposed in the Republican primary.

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GRAPHIC: COLOR MAP, SUN STAFF, Legislative District 37A

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