



215 of 226 DOCUMENTS

Copyright 1998 The Baltimore Sun Company
The Baltimore Sun

April 4, 1998, Saturday, FINAL EDITION

SECTION: TELEGRAPH (NEWS), Pg. 1A

LENGTH: 1194 words

HEADLINE: Racial tide turns on Eastern Shore, but only to point; Blacks' political gains fail to translate into higher-paying jobs

BYLINE: Chris Guy, SUN STAFF

BODY:

SALISBURY -- For Rudolph and Honiss Cane, life has been about picking their battles and moving forward. And on the slow-to-change Eastern Shore, the brothers say, the next election is just one more reason to remain focused on the prize of equal opportunity.

The men are veterans of the struggle to eliminate the at-large voting systems and other election laws that black leaders blamed for keeping them from power for decades.

Rudolph, 63, a two-term Wicomico County commissioner, is bent on becoming the first African-American from the nine-county peninsula to win a seat in the General Assembly. At 66, Honiss, "the first and only black to sit on the Pocomoke City Council," is running unopposed to keep the post he has held since 1986.

"Obviously, there have been changes," said Rudolph Cane. "It hasn't changed enough. I think it's a dangerous thing for some people to have made it and to forget about others who have not."

In a week when many are remembering the assassination 30 years ago of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. -- and the civil rights legacy of his life -- black leaders throughout the Shore are taking stock.

Although they hold more than two dozen municipal and county offices, they say they need to do more to improve economic opportunities for minorities on the Eastern Shore.

"There's no question there has been a lot of improvement for African-American people on the Shore," said Octavene Saunders, a black two-term Cambridge city councilwoman who is challenging Cane for the Democratic nomination in the House of Delegates District 37-A -- created under court order four years ago.

"I am fully aware of the impact of the black-majority district," she said. "But the lack of economic opportunity for low-income people is the main issue. Certainly, you have to be loyal to your district, your constituents. But the entire Shore needs economic growth. That affects us all, black or white."

Racial tide turns on Eastern Shore, but only to point; Blacks' political gains fail to translate into higher-paying jobs The Baltimore Sun April 4, 1998, Saturday,

District 37-A, which includes parts of Dorchester and Wicomico counties, was drawn under the 1994 order of a panel of federal judges who cited years of political inequities on the lower Eastern Shore.

Creation of the district marked the end of a decade of lawsuits brought by local activists, the American Civil Liberties Union and the NAACP.

Beginning in 1985, court challenges in towns such as Easton, Snow Hill and Princess Anne and in Worcester, Somerset, Dorchester and Wicomico counties forced an end to at-large districts.

"If you looked in 1980, you clearly would have seen the dearth of African-American elected officials," said C. Christopher Brown, a Baltimore attorney and law professor who helped lead the court actions. "I think now there is something approaching proportionality."

In 1994, Republican Don B. Hughes, who is white, became the first to go to Annapolis from District 37-A, defeating Cane by 20 votes. Lemuel D. Chester, who in 1986 became the first African-American to be elected a Dorchester County commissioner, ran as an independent.

By the numbers

Chester is sitting out this election and either Cane or Saunders will face Hughes in the general election in November. As of the end of March, the district, which is 60 percent black, had 7,407 Democrats and 3,209 Republicans among its 12,000 registered voters, said Judy Ritter, director of the Wicomico County elections office.

Criticized for splitting the black vote in 1994, Chester, 52, says he ran as an independent because county Democrats were not supportive even though he had experience as a county commissioner. Still, he says, a majority-black district was long overdue.

"I hope the special districts remain in place," Chester said. "We were left out of the loop for so long, it's hard to argue against this type of affirmative action. For instance, a year before I won the commissioner seat under a district system, I couldn't win a Cambridge City Council seat, running at-large. I think that's just the reality."

Hughes said he hopes he has put the racial issue behind him during his first term.

Preserving agriculture and attracting high-tech industry are the goals that count, he said.

"If you look at my history, I've never cared where someone is from, what color they are," Hughes said. "I look out for my district first, the Shore second and the state third. We have a stable, capable work force on the Shore. We ought to be able to use that to attract the kind of industry we need to give people decent jobs."

With nearly 15 percent of all households earning \$ 10,000 a year or less in the nine Eastern Shore counties, officials say, black families often struggle.

In Talbot County, for instance, the 1990 Census showed per capita income for whites at about \$ 21,000 a year and \$ 8,500 for blacks. In Worcester County, which includes Ocean City, the annual per capita income was \$ 16,000 for whites compared with \$ 7,800 for blacks.

Carol O. Snowden, a former Annapolis alderman who acted as a consultant in many of the voting rights cases on the Shore, says expectations have been raised as more blacks have been elected.

"Who can argue with the progress that has been made?" said Snowden. "Now there are new challenges, most of them economic. With empowerment should come improvement. I think that's what's being tested on the Shore."

'Come to respect us'

Racial tide turns on Eastern Shore, but only to point; Blacks' political gains fail to translate into higher-paying jobs The Baltimore Sun April 4, 1998, Saturday,

In Worcester County, James L. Purnell Jr. is three years into his first term as a county commissioner. But the bitter fight to end Worcester's at-large system -- which the county resisted at a cost of \$ 1.3 million in legal fees -- remains fresh in his mind.

But, says the 61-year-old former NAACP chairman, much has changed. "I think the county has come to grips with itself as it relates to blacks becoming involved in government," Purnell said. "People have come to respect us in the political arena."

Now, Purnell said, issues such as school construction, growth management and attracting jobs dominate debate in Worcester County.

"All five commissioners have to deal with a growth problem in the northern part of the county. We're looking at a high school that was designed to hold 1,000 that soon is going to have 1,500 students because of the growth around Ocean City," Purnell said. "These kinds of issues affect everybody. Black or white doesn't make a difference."

In a region dominated by the agriculture, service and tourism industries, officials worry that many new jobs available on the Shore offer little more than subsistence wages.

One example, says Rudolph Cane, is the \$ 225 million luxury resort and residential community planned for the 351-acre Eastern Shore Hospital Center site along the Choptank River in Cambridge. Despite the prospect of 1,000 jobs spawned by the Hyatt Hotels Corp. project, Cane is skeptical about the long-term benefits for black workers.

"Those are going to be all service jobs, people changing linens, turning down beds," Cane said. "Most won't be making much more than minimum wage. You can't meet your family's obligations making minimum wage. That's the working poor, and we have to get beyond that to quality, high-paying jobs by bringing in industry."

Pub Date: 4/04/98

GRAPHIC: COLOR PHOTO, BARBARA H. TAYLOR: SUN STAFF, "I think it's a dangerous thing for some people to have made it and to forget about others who have not." Rudolph Cane, striving to be the first Shore black to win a General Assembly seat

LOAD-DATE: April 6, 1998