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HEADLINE: Treasurer takes steady route to top; Race, politics are balancing act for black politician; 'A difficult campaign'; Del. Dixon began political career on school board

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BODY:

As Maryland's newly elected treasurer, Richard N. Dixon has reached one of the top posts in state government after a steady climb that often has been a balancing act between politics and race.

The thin line Mr. Dixon has walked as a black legislator from predominantly white Carroll County never was more clear than last week when the veteran Democratic delegate drew fire from some black legislators and the state NAACP for his conservative voting record.

Ironically, Mr. Dixon, a Westminster resident who traces his family back six generations in the area, becomes the first black elected to a state constitutional post, one of the few Carroll County residents to achieve such political heights.

Despite severe criticism, Mr. Dixon garnered solid support from the State House leadership and Republican legislators to easily win the \$ 100,000-a-year post in a 134-54 General Assembly vote on Friday. He is expected to assume the treasurer's duties about Feb. 1.

"He's been the first black in a lot of things," said Dr. Philip Benzil, a Westminster dentist and Democratic Party activist who served with Mr. Dixon on the Carroll school board in the early 1970s. "He has achieved far beyond what anyone had a right to expect from an African-American from Carroll County.

"We saw eye to eye on most issues then. Richard would be the first to agree with me that that is no longer the case," said Dr. Benzil. "I think he'll make a fine state treasurer, but I wish he stood up on some of the issues that are pertinent."

Dr. Benzil said Mr. Dixon should have found ways to both serve his constituents and represent blacks better as a legislator.

No one doubted Mr. Dixon's credentials for treasurer, a position from which the long-serving Lucille Maurer resigned because of illness. Mr. Dixon has a graduate business degree from Morgan State University. A stockbroker and financial consultant, he is an assistant vice president at Merrill Lynch in Baltimore, but says he will resign within two weeks. He also plans to give up his seat in the legislature. House of Delegates.

Mr. Dixon is a longtime member of the powerful House Appropriations Committee. Even so, the legislative Black Caucus only narrowly endorsed his bid for treasurer. Some members criticized him for never joining the group and for abstaining on a major affirmative-action vote in the legislature last year. Detractors even likened him to Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, who opposes affirmative action.

The Maryland chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People chose a white liberal to support for treasurer rather than Mr. Dixon. NAACP leaders said Del. Pauline H. Menes, a Prince George's County Democrat, was backed for her courage and commitment to civil rights legislation.

But some black lawmakers say such politically charged issues obscure Mr. Dixon's low-key but effective efforts.

"Most of those issues that are publicized have done very little for the community," said Del. Clarence Davis, a Baltimore Democrat. "I think I would challenge any of them to do as much for the black community as Richard Dixon has done. Out of his own volition he has established a scholarship in his mother's name at Morgan State. He serves black education institutions, which enhance the quality of life for all of us. He puts his money there."

Mr. Dixon, the only Democrat representing Carroll County in the State House this session, defends his legislative record, saying he always has voted for his constituency, which is 98 percent white.

"If I hadn't reflected their wishes, I wouldn't have lasted this long," said Mr. Dixon, who has been in the legislature since 1983. "I wouldn't have lasted one term."

Mr. Dixon, 57, grew up in segregated Carroll County, attending the county's all-black Robert Moton School in Westminster. He acknowledges that the criticism from black political groups was painful.

"It was a difficult campaign," he said. "There were cheap shots. I've been working in the African-American community for more than 25 years."

Longtime Carroll political observers concur that Mr. Dixon could not have been re-elected in this overwhelmingly Republican county without being a conservative legislator attuned to the wishes of his constituents.

"He has thought a great deal where his constituents are on issues and he tries in most of his votes to reflect on those views, as he sees them," said Greg Pecoraro, a Carroll Democratic State Central Committee member.

"He's always been responsive to the people and that plays a big role in his re-election," Mr. Pecora said.

Former state Sen. Charles H. Smelser, whom Mr. Dixon credits with encouraging him to first run for state office, said the newly elected treasurer has played his political cards well.

"I've never known anyone who represents his district like Richard does," said Mr. Smelser, president of New Windsor State Bank. "He knows people and votes accordingly. That's what people sent him down there to do."

Mr. Dixon, a former U.S. Army paratrooper captain who left the military in 1968 after eight years, lost his first bid for a House of Delegates seat in 1978.

"I wasn't sure I would run again." Mr. Dixon said. "It's a very humbling experience to lose an election. It's an experience I don't ever want to go through again. It's like walking down a hallway and all the doors are locked."

He has beaten the odds since. Over the years, Mr. Dixon has established a conservative legislative record. Last year, for example, he drew fire from Democrats for his support of a personal income tax cut being touted by Republicans. "That's the way most of my constituents would have wanted me to vote," Mr. Dixon said.

He has been chairman of a committee that oversees arcane pension issues and another panel that oversees audits of state agencies. House Speaker Casper R. Taylor Jr. rewarded Mr. Dixon last year with an plum assignment as chairman of a subcommittee that oversees state building projects.

And Mr. Dixon has not ignored Carroll County. Mr. Pecoraro and others said pointed out that he was instrumental in securing money for county schools, the

new library at Western Maryland College, the newly built YMCA and Carroll Community College.

"He's made a lifetime commitment to education," said Joseph F. Shields, president of Carroll Community College. "We see him as one of our strongest supporters."

Mr. Dixon's political career began in 1970 when he was first appointed to the school board -- he was chosen over a more liberal black candidate. But even his tenure on that board came under fire during the recent campaign when detractors criticized his opposition as a school board member to a Martin Luther King Jr. holiday.

His stance hasn't changed.

"It should be a national holiday but schoolchildren should be in school learning about Martin Luther King," Mr. Dixon said.

The State House and the Goldstein Treasury Building in Annapolis may be a long way from Westminster, but those closest to Mr. Dixon say he hasn't strayed too far from the path his parents, Thomas and Mamie Dixon, set him on.

"To me, in a lot of ways he's the American ideal," said Dwight Dingle, general manager of radio station WTTR in Westminster. "He takes great pride in the fact that his father was a janitor. Richard is a self-made man. He'll be the first one to say he had great values instilled in him from his family."

His father, Mr. Dixon recalled, held two jobs. His mother, Mamie, was active in community organizations. The Dixons were adamant about having their children attend college. All six started; four finished.

Elizabeth Hooper, a retired nurse from Westminster who lived around the corner from the Dixons, recalled that even as a young man Mr. Dixon was someone who when "he sets his mind to something does it."

"He always seemed very studious," said Mrs. Hooper. "He was always looking up."

GRAPHIC: PHOTO, Treasurer: Richard N. Dixon is expected to start about Feb. 1.

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