

The Sun

**Absentee ballots fail to add up to secure seat on bench for Hill Staton
1st African-American judge in county hoped for last-minute surge**

by Dan Morse Sun staff writer Shanon D. Murray contributed to this article. SUN STAFF The Baltimore Sun

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With the bulk of absentee ballots now counted, Howard County's first African-American judge has been mathematically eliminated from the contentious Circuit Court judges race.

"The numbers speak for themselves," sitting Judge Donna Hill Staton said Friday.

She declined to outright concede that she has finished third in the four-way race for two 15-year terms on the court. But the vote totals, as of Friday's tally of 4,226 absentee ballots, showed: Sitting Circuit Judge Diane O. Leasure with 43,655 votes.

District Judge Lenore R. Gelfman with 43,480 votes.

Hill Staton with 41,591 votes.

Local attorney Jonathan Scott Smith with 36,428 votes.

County election officials said they expect to count about 620 more absentee votes next week. As of now, Hill Staton trails second-place finisher Gelfman by 1,889 votes. So there are not enough for Hill Staton to catch Gelfman.

The somewhat meaningless race for first place remains undecided. Gelfman trails Leasure by only 175 votes.

Final results are due Friday.

Hill Staton and her supporters had been hoping for an unlikely last-minute push from the counting of the absentee ballots since election night last Tuesday, when she trailed Gelfman by 1,604 votes.

Instead, the gap increased. According to elections officials, the highest number of absentee ballots were mailed to western Howard, the most conservative part of the county.

Last year Gov. Parris N. Glendening appointed Hill Staton and Leasure to Circuit judgeships. Hill Staton was the county's first black judge, and she and Leasure were the first women to serve on the Circuit bench in Howard.

Asked Friday if she would be in the courtroom next week, Hill Staton said: "I will continue to do my job until a transition is made."

Hill Staton's term technically ends Friday, when the election results become official. Gelfman then has 30 days to be sworn in.

County election officials said they counted a total of 2,942 absentee ballots Thursday and 1,284 Friday.

Representatives from each campaign have been observing the counting procedure and said Friday they are pleased with how it went.

Six elections officials -- three Democrats and three Republicans -- open the ballots and check for signatures and the requisite envelope-within-an-envelope. Officials rejected only seven of the 4,226 ballots they opened.

Their efforts were slowed Friday because some of the ballots did not have corner-markings that are used to guide the ballots through automatic counting machines, said Barbara Feaga, the county's director of elections. Officials had to affix small stickers onto these ballots.

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